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Perceptions of the Achievement Gap Between Black and White High School Students

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PERCEPTIONS OF THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

by

GWENDOLYN JANEEN ATKINSON

(Under the Direction of Linda M. Arthur)

ABSTRACT

Many United States public school systems have been battling with the achievement gap between Black and White students. It has been over 50 years since desegregation, and evidence from data still shows that Black children are still lagging behind White children on standardized tests and graduation from high school. Within a Southeastern school district in the United States, two high schools struggle to close the achievement gap between Black and White students. Some critics of public schools believe that these factors impact school success: safe and orderly environment within the schools, instructional strategies, and home atmosphere. Other factors may be high expectations for success, frequent monitoring of student progress, opportunity to learn and student time on task, and representation of minorities on faculty. In addition to factors that are controlled by schools, there are factors that are contributed by students that affect student achievement gap, especially high school graduation. Some factors are socioeconomic status; a lack of connection the school environment, a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and the weight of real world events.

The researcher conducted a study using qualitative methodology to provide a deeper understanding of how school administrators, members of the Board of Education, high school teachers, and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black

and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with school administrators and board members and from a focus group of high school teachers and from two focus groups of high school students. Interview responses were recorded, analyzed using Creswell Data Analysis, and written in narrative form for reporting.

The researcher found that four themes emerged about of the achievement gap and strategies to closing the achievement gap: 1. Factors that contribute to achievement gap, 2. Effect of achievement gap, 3. Ways to closing the achievement gap, and 4. Barriers to closing the achievement gap.

INDEX WORDS: Achievement Gap, Black and White High School Students, Graduation Rate, High School Dropouts, Minority Students, Student Achievement

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Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandparents, Jake and Redessa Barneman, my uncle, Lenis Rountree, and my extended grandmother, Mrs. Nonie Rountree. These are my loved ones who challenged me and instilled in me the value of education. Although they are no longer here, I would like to thank them for helping me reach this level of achievement.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Across the nation, educators are facing the challenges of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The main purpose of the No Child Left Behind Act is to close the achievement gap among all students regardless of mental and physical disabilities, race, and socioeconomic status by 2013-2014 school year. To accomplish NCLB goals, states are being held more accountable for student achievement, linked in large part to student performance on state standardized tests. The No Child Left Behind Act requires states to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals to ensure school accountability for student achievement on state tests.

Before the No Child Left Behind Act was enacted in 2001, public schools already worried about closing the educational achievement gap among all students, especially Black students since *Brown vs. Board of Topeka Kansas* (Young, Wright, & Laster, 2005; Olneck, 2005; Ikpa, 2004). Most public school educators realize the indictment of wide achievement gaps among student groups. “While considerable progress in reducing racial disparities in academic achievement was made during the 1970s and through the mid-1980s, that progress stalled in the 1990s, and today, at all ages, substantial disparities remain between the academic success of African Americans and European Americans [White Americans]” (Olneck, 2005, p. 95). Reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), Black 8th grade students’ average reading scale scores in 2008 were 21 points less than White 8th grade students’ average reading scale scores and Black 8th grade students’ average mathematics scale scores were 28 points less than White 8th grade students’ average mathematic scale scores. In addition, the long-term trend of the

average scale scores in reading and mathematics scores for age 17 year olds continued to increase but the gap between Black and White students' scores remain the same. NCES indicated in their data analysis that Black students as a group scored below 75 percent of White students on most standardized tests (Munk, 2001; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Haycock (1997) data analysis indicated that the achievement gap between Black and White students is more evident in grades, test scores, course selection and graduation rate. According to Balfanz and Legters (2004), approximately 46% or more of high school students do not graduate, especially in schools located in northern and western cities and throughout the southern states, let alone leave high school prepared to fully participate in civic life. For many students, future taxpayers, in Georgia, the only real and lasting pipeline out of poverty in today's society is a solid high school education followed by post secondary schooling or training. But the pipeline is cracked and broken (Balfanz and Legters, 2004). "Typically, in America's public schools, income, race, language background and other demographic variables can predict students' academic success" (Uline & Johnson, 2005 p. 1).

Before building a data-driven education framework to encourage academic growth for all students, educators must examine factors that affect student achievement (Gardner 2002 & Decker 2003). Marzano (2003) identified school, teacher, and student factors that affect student achievement. Some factors include safe and orderly environment, instructional strategies, and home atmosphere, respectively (Marzano).

In addition to those factors affecting student achievement, the National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force has indicated that increasing the percentage of teachers of color in classrooms is strongly related to narrowing the achievement gap

(“Techniques: Connecting Education & Careers,” 2005). Similarly, the National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force found that students of color tend to perform better when taught by teachers from their own ethnic groups (2005). Weiher (2000) confirmed that the academic performance of minority students was better in schools that have more minority teachers. Howard (2003, p. 150) states that:

The paucity of teachers of color also has moral and societal implications. In an increasing diverse society, it is crucial that students of all ethnic backgrounds and at all grade levels interact with individuals from different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Evidence suggests that students benefit from having well-trained teachers who come from similar ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and who can contribute to the students’ sense of belonging and, ultimately, their academic achievement.

Evidence of Achievement Gap

A recent longitudinal study by Bali and Alvarez (2004) analyzed the racial gap for the first four grades in the Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD). The school district’s student body consisted of 80% or more Black and Hispanic students. The student body, socioeconomically, was poorer and more disadvantaged than the statewide student body. Data were collected from the reading and math test scores from the Stanford 9 scores for each sample student. Additional data were collected from the student’s background and family characteristics, like socioeconomic status, family structure, and language fluency to achievement outcomes. Other data were collected on the school, such as teachers’ credentials, number of computers, class size, population composition, and percentage of minority teachers. The researchers utilized multivariate analyses to examine the dynamics

of the racial gaps between first grade through fourth grade after controlling for student background and school attributes. The results of the study indicated that the achievement gap widens throughout the later elementary grades and on into middle and high school (2004). To explain the gap, the researchers examined three factors that contribute to the achievement gap: the enrollment of minorities in lower-quality schools, the inconsistencies of test measures across time that can potentially favor White students, and the changing importance of parenting versus strategies that are used by schools. The researchers concluded there was little evidence supporting school quality explanations for the growing gaps in the PUSD; and there was little evidence supporting by-product of standardized testing explanations for the growing gaps in the PUSD (2004). The results indicated that family structure has a positive effect for Black students as children age, but for Hispanic and White students the effect is minimal. However, school factors, such as more minority teachers and smaller class sizes become more relevant as children age (2004).

Ipka (2003b & 2004) analyzed at-risk children in ten neighborhood elementary schools that were more than 99 percent Black. Ipka investigated trends in the achievement gap between resegregated and desegregated schools in the city of Norfolk, Virginia. Ipka analyzed the mathematics and science scores from the Standards of Learning Tests for students in grades three and five for the years 1998 – 2001. Ipka's (2003b) findings of the research indicated that in the resegregated schools the achievement gap was higher than in the integrated schools. However, both types of schools had an increased achievement gap in mathematics and science scores. Ipka's (2003a) longitudinal quantitative study analyzing the trends in the achievement gap

between Black and White students in the Norfolk Public School System between 1991 and 1996 at all grade levels found that the achievement gap continues to widen as the children age (2003a). Ipka (2004, p. 12) states “Educators, social scientists, and politicians must come to the realization that a global society that continues to ignore the significance of providing integrated educational experiences for its children cannot produce well-educated individuals. Policies that facilitate gaps of any kind among groups of individuals are both legally and morally indefensible”. Therefore, such policies that facilitate gaps of any kind among groups of individuals deny equal access to educational opportunities.

Mcgee (2004) studied the difference in academic performance between low-income children and their peers, between minority children and their classmates, and between those schools that serve a majority of children from low-income families and those that serve a more advantaged population in Golden-Spike Schools, Illinois. Analyzing quantitative and qualitative data, Mcgee found that the gap can be closed and that the education of poor children can be improved with strong leadership, quality teachers, and strong support from the community. Also, Mcgee indicated that school characteristics, such as school size, class size, and alignment with state standards, had little influence, if any, on closing the achievement gap. In order for districts with high-poverty schools to be successful in closing the achievement gap, efforts of the state and local governing body to adopt and implement more policies, such as smaller school and class sizes, highly qualified teachers, and curriculums that align with state standards that will support closing the achievement gap (2004).

Effective Schools

Beginning as early as the 1980's, the seven correlates of effective schools are still being used in the school improvement process. The seven correlates are the only set of research-based characteristics of school's climate associated with improved student learning. The seven correlates are as follow (Taylor, 2002, p. 378): 1) Clear School Mission, 2) High Expectations for Success, 3) Instructional Leadership, 4) Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress, 5) Opportunity to Learn and Student Time on Task, 6) Safe and Orderly Environment, and 7) Home-School Relations.

Lezotte (1992) emphasized that effective schools have leaders that are viewed as instructional leaders, have a faculty that is directly involved in the decision-making process, have a leader who is able to provide guidance, support, encouragement to staff members when requested, have a student body who treat teachers and one another with respect, and have a faculty that shares a commitment to specific instructional goals, priorities, assessments, and procedures. Zigarelli's (1996) study indicated that characteristics of an effective school included a culture of academic achievement, principal leadership and involvement, high teacher morale, and high parental involvement. Lezotte (1992) stated

“Finally we know from Effective Schools research how to achieve learning for all. External forces are generally rallying behind the expectation that schools must change to meet changing times and changing societal needs. At a deeper level, most educators share the vision that schools must be able to succeed in educating all children” (p.16)

Johannesen-Brock and Groth (2003) suggested that a useful reform strategy to improve student achievement is to begin the process of changing organizational structure to create a school that has strong characteristics of effective schools. Johannesen-Brock and Groth (2003) presented a longitudinal case study over a 4-year period of 54 low-income and racial, ethnic, or language minority schools or “Highly Impacted Schools”. There were 4 high schools, 7 middle/junior high schools, and 43 elementary schools. These schools were “highly impacted” based on the following criteria: the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, ethnic minorities, English Language Learners (ELL), single parent households, and student mobility rate. The study suggests there are six key factors of school reform that are most effective at improving student achievement. The six factors include (p.169): 1) Ongoing professional development, 2) A high degree of staff involvement, 3) A strong focus or vision of the school based on improving student learning, 4) Continuous monitoring and evaluation of both program and student achievement, 5) Reallocation of resources to support a school-wide plan, and 6) Strong principal leadership.

Johannesen-Brock and Groth’s (2003) longitudinal case study provided evidence that an effective school does not occur overnight, but rather with consistent organizational change. Schools may view these six factors outlined by Johannesen-Brock’s longitudinal case study as a real opportunity to improve the academic circumstances of their students, regardless of any negative factors of which educators do not have control.

Snipes and Casserly (2004) completed a case study on *Foundation for Success*. *Foundation for Success* is a reform for improving student achievement and reducing racial achievement gaps in urban school districts. In this 3-year case study, three urban

school districts, Houston Independent School District, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, and Sacramento City Unified School District, were observed for their reform efforts. In this study, it was noted that certain conditions should be met prior to making changes for reform. Some of the conditions that focus on improving student achievement include creation of a shared vision; evolution of a new role for the school board that focuses on policy-level decisions; a diagnosis of the district's major instructional challenges, and the development of a strategy for addressing them; an ability to flesh out the leadership's vision for reform, and achieve buy-in from city and district stakeholders; a focus on revamping district business operations to serve and support the schools; and locating and matching new resources to support the vision for reform (p. 133). After stabilizing the political and organizational structure of the school districts, the study noted some common strategies that were successful in improving student achievement: set goals for student achievement, align curriculum and define a timeline; create concrete accountability system for entire district for leadership and building level personnel; focus attention on the lowest-performing schools; develop district-wide curricula and instructional approaches; and provide intensive instruction in reading and math to middle and high school students, even if it came at the expense of other subjects (p. 133-134). The findings in this case study emphasize the importance of having "a strong empirical basis for understanding the relationship between these educational improvement strategies and changes in teaching, learning, and student achievement in large school systems" (Snipes & Casserly, 2004, p. 140).

To reinforce the idea that parent and community development in a school improves student achievement, Sheldon (2003) completed a study titled “Linking School-Family-Community Partnerships in Urban Elementary Schools to Student Achievement on State Tests”. The study examined the relationship between the quality of school, family, and community partnership programs and student performance on state-mandated achievement tests. Data were collected from 82 elementary schools located in a large urban school district. Data included surveys and achievement data from the state of Maryland’s Web site. The achievement data consisted of results from the state’s mandated Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). This study gave creditability to the utilization of programs like School Development Plan and National Network of Partnerships Schools to increase family and community involvement in schools. The results of this empirical study suggested that there is a strong relationship between schools’ efforts to improve school, family, and community partnerships and higher levels of student performance on state achievement tests in Maryland (2003).

Most changes or implementations to improve student achievement have had positive outcomes, but there are some programs that do not. An example of a reform strategy for student achievement that does not provide a high-level student achievement result is called Co-nect. Ross and Lowther (2003) evaluated the Co-nect school reform design in a study titled “Impacts of the Co-nect School Reform Design on Classroom Instruction, School Climate, and Student Achievement in Inner-City Schools”. This study evaluated the Co-nect school reform design in 5 inner-city schools in Memphis, Tennessee on process and outcome measures consisting of the following: (a) school climate, (b)

teaching methods, (c) teacher buy-in, (d) level of design implementation, and (e) student achievement on state-mandated tests. Co-nect is a design that is part of the Comprehensive Reform Demonstration Program. Congress created the Comprehensive Reform Demonstration Program in 1998 to provide funds to implement “research-based” designs that would primarily serve schools with disadvantaged student populations (2003).

Ross and Lowther (2003) study yielded mixed results in raising student achievement. Two out of the five schools exhibit negative achievement patterns. However, in these schools, the level of enthusiasm to implement Co-nect, level of the school climate, level of the teacher buy-in reform, and the amount of time students were actively engaged on academically-focused instruction were lower. Before selecting a design like Co-nect, educators and other stakeholders should determine what is needed to ensure success on both program implementation and expected student achievement and program sustainability.

Effective Leaders

Cruz believes that “effective principals are people of integrity, as exemplified by their honesty, sincerity, and compassion for others” (Cruz, 1995, p. 15). He found that certain characteristics “not only promote effective leadership, but are necessary for the survival of new principals” (Cruz, 1995, p. 17). Necessary characteristics are being a communicator, being a team builder, encouraging change, promoting a safe school environment, and understanding the school culture. Effective principals have a positive impact on a district’s mission. They recognize that a school has a unique culture; they promote student achievement; and they recognize cultural diversity (Cruz).

Johnson and Uline (2005) suggested that leaders who have closed the achievement gap utilized the six standards of the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC): 1) the vision of learning; 2) the culture of teaching and learning; 3) the management of learning; 4) relationships with the broader community to foster learning; 5) integrity, fairness, and ethics in learning; and 5) the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context of learning. Each leader must possess knowledge, dispositions, and skills to create an effective school.

Doughty (2005) did a 3-year case study on principal's leadership in a failing high school. Doughty studied details of his school improvement plan and strategies he implemented during the 2001-2004 school years. Doughty analyzed student achievement by comparing the percentage of students passing the Georgia High School Graduation Test in every subject area from 1998-2001 and 2001-2004. The researcher found that Black students' test scores improved; however, the White students' test scores decreased, stayed the same, or only slightly increased. He stated that the quality of instructions improved the test scores for Black students. To explain the decline in his White students' scores, he believes that conflict on the leadership team and lack of staff development caused a negative impact on White student achievement.

Elmore (2004) argues that agency – or the initiative and control one takes to accomplish something – is critical to the leadership and learning demanded to achieve accountability goals. To achieve accountability goals, principals and teachers who recognize and implement effective instruction, district leaders who recognize effective schools and states that recognize effective districts must support and transfer the knowledge required for public school's educational system to reform.

Statement of the Problem

It has been over 50 years since the desegregation of public schools. The purpose of desegregation was to provide equality and equity in education for the Black students. The results of achievement tests during segregation indicated that Black children lagged behind White children. Even though progress of narrowing the achievement gap has been made in the past, Black students are still performing lower on standardized tests than White students, and nearly half of our nation's Black students are not graduating from high school. With the new legislation mandate, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, many school systems are challenged with implementing standards-based reform to close the achievement gap among all students regardless of race and socioeconomic status.

The purpose of the study is to examine how school administrators, members of the Board of Education, and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern county school district in the United States. The county population of this Southeastern school district in the United States is approximately 70% white, 30% black, and 5% of Hispanic. With an average student population of approximately 13,000, this Southeastern school district in the United States spent an average of \$7,100 per student for public education each year between 2001 and 2009. The district has two high schools. Both schools have an average enrollment of 1800. Both schools have an average student ratio population of Whites to Blacks of 60% to 40%. The average number of students who are economically disadvantaged is approximately 40%. However, the average high school dropout rate between 2001 and 2005 was reported to be approximately 8% for all students in grades 9

to 12, with the state average at 5%. Also, the average high school dropout rate for Black students was 9% and for White students was 7%.

Research Questions

This study investigated how school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern county school district in the United States?

Conceptual Framework

This research examined how school administrators, members of the Board of Education, high school teachers and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern county school district in the United States. The researcher believes that perceptions of the achievement gap problems alter what can be done about those problems. Hence, it is important to know how school administrators, members of the Board of Education, high school teachers, and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students. School administrators, members of the Board of Education, high school teachers and high school students' perception on the relationship between achievement gap can be conceptualized at a fairly general level depicted in Figure 1.1

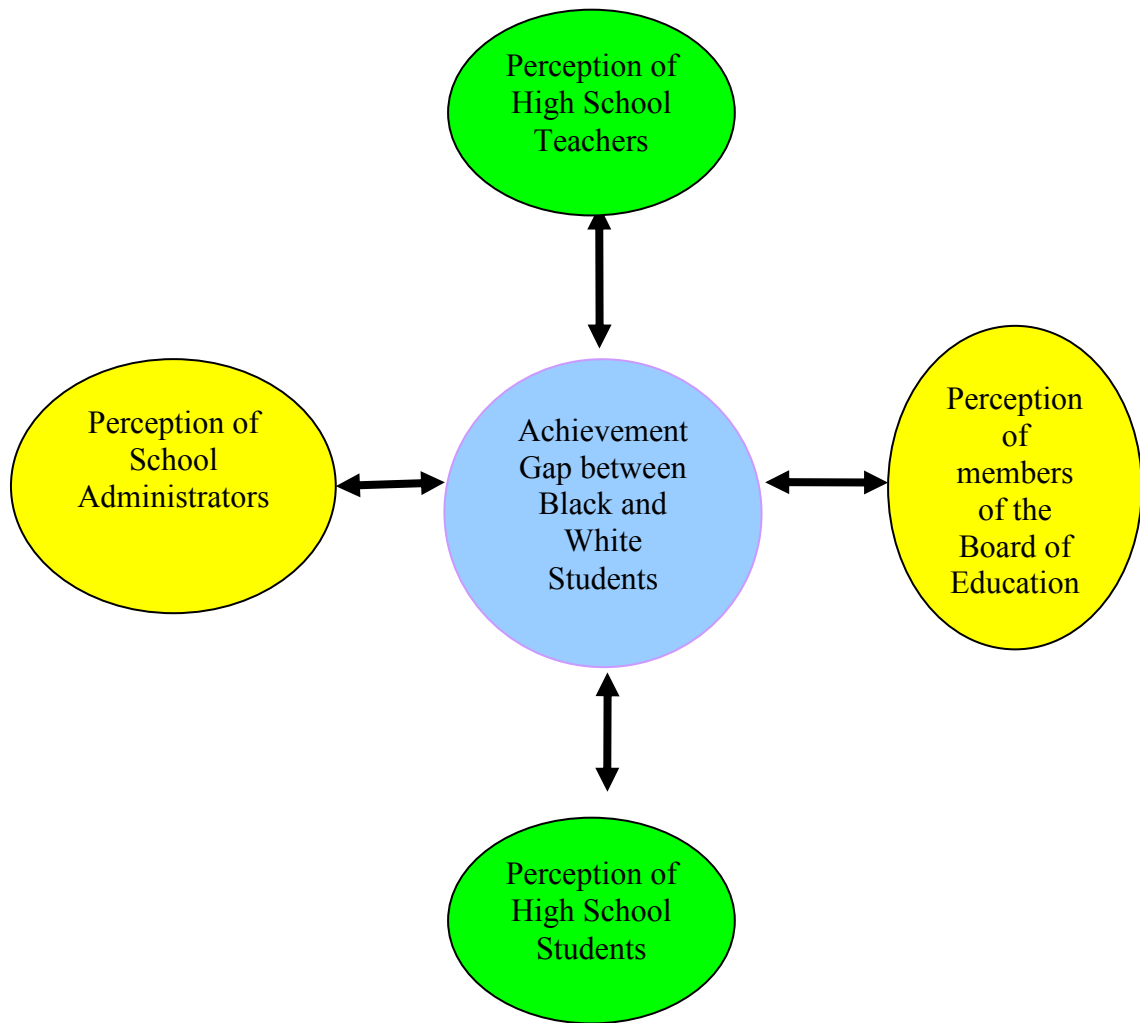


FIGURE 1.1: Conceptual framework on how school administrators, members of the Board of Education [school leaders], high school teachers, and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students.

Significance of the Study

Failing schools and significant differences between Black and White students' achievement scores are on the rise across the nation. As a result, the U.S. government has taken charge and placed high expectations on educators with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002). NCLB's purpose is to provide each child with the opportunity for high-quality education. Knowing that school practices, teachers, and students themselves are factors that affect student achievement; this study is

a research effort to examine how school administrators, members of the Board of Education, high school teachers and high school students perceive the achievement gap in a Southeastern county school district in the United States high schools. This study may provide administrators, school board members, and teachers with pertinent information that contribute to closing the achievement gap among Black and White high school students in a Southeastern county school district in the United States.

Being an aspiring Black administrator who is a native of the affluent Southeastern county in the United States that spends a sizeable amount per student to educate and who has been educated through its school system, the researcher desires to identify and provide solutions for the achievement gap in this system's high schools. Neither high school in this Southeastern county in the United States made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2003-2004, 2005-2006, and 2008-2009 school years and the high school graduation rate is not equal or greater than the state average. It disappoints the researcher to know that the high school that the researcher graduated from constantly does not make Adequate Yearly Progress because of socioeconomic and minority subgroups. Even though both schools failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress in 2003-2004, 2005-2006, and 2008-2009 school years, one school has much greater disparity between Black and White achievement than the other.

Procedures

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to examine how school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers, and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern county

school district in the United States. Since the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), this federal law is the first to require that high schools and school systems be held accountable in a meaningful way for graduation rates as well as performance on academic assessments. Therefore, high school graduation rates have gained prominence especially for students from historically disadvantaged minority groups who have less than 50% chance of finishing high school with a diploma. Many high schools and school systems view graduation rates as an important indicator of system performance. The research question was concerned with how school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers, and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern county in the United States.

Design

This was a qualitative study. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with five school leaders which included, the Superintendent, two school administrators and two Board of Education members, who have influences on educational practices and policies implemented to close the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern county school district in the United States, a focus group of four academic high school teachers, and a two focus groups of four high school students each from the school district. This case study gathered in-depth data specifically to the high schools in a Southeastern county school district in the United States in closing the achievement gap between Black and White high school students.

Population and Sample Selection

The population for this study included a purposive sampling of the Superintendent, two school administrators, two Board of Education members, four academic high school teachers and two focus groups of four high school students each to provide a good cross representation gender and ethnicity.

Instrumentation

After obtaining Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval, the researcher contacted the participants for an interview. Data for this study was collected by conducting an in-depth audio-taped interview with each participant in order to gather as much information from each participant on his or her perception on the achievement gap between Black and White high school students. The researcher gave each participant copy of the Informed Consent Form to sign prior to conducting the interview. The researcher obtained parental permission via a signed copy of the Informed Consent Form for all high school students participating in focus group prior to conducting the interview. The participants were informed that the interviews would last approximately 60-90 minutes; however, there may be a need to conduct follow-up interviews if necessary.

Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed the audio-tapes and identified common and recurring themes, using Creswell Data Analysis, that arose from each participant's responses to the interview questions about the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern county school district in the United States.

Limitations

In this study, the researcher is assumed that majority of those asked to participate will do so and will answer honestly and with trust in anonymity promised by the researcher. It was expected, however that the Superintendent, school administrators, Board of Education members, and teachers would provide answers at times that would correlate to the literature or provide answers that are “politically correct”.

Delimitations

The limitation is that the study will be for high schools in a Southeastern county school district in the United States and findings are not generalizable to any other schools in the district in the United States.

Definition of Terms

Achievement Gap: Refers to the observed disparity on a number of educational measures between the performance of groups of students, especially defined by gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Georgia High School Graduation Rate Formula: is the number of students who graduated with a regular diploma divided by the total number of graduates plus documented high school dropouts (the sum of dropouts from each grade, 9-12, in the corresponding years that a fourth-year graduated would have been enrolled in those grades) and other non-graduates.

School Process Factors: Refers to school and teacher attitudes, school environment, minority representation on faculty, community involvement, instructional and pedagogical practices, and any other factors the school has control over or contributes to.

Student Background Factors: Refers to the social class and race of a student.

Summary

Many United States public school systems have been battling with the achievement gap between Black and White students. It has been over 50 years since desegregation, and evidence from data still shows that Black children are still lagging behind White children on standardized tests and graduation from high school. To ensure accountability and to close the achievement gap among all students, regardless of race and socioeconomic status, the federal government has mandated a new legislation: No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. With the use of data, educators are expected to examine factors that affect student achievement and implement a plan of action to close the achievement gap. Some critics of public schools believe that these factors impact school success: safe and orderly environment within the schools, instructional strategies, and home atmosphere. Other factors may be high expectations for success, frequent monitoring of student progress, opportunity to learn and student time on task, and representation of minorities on faculty.

The design of this study was qualitative to provide a deeper understanding of the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern county school district in the United States.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

School districts and school administrators have been given an enormous task by the Senate and the House of Representatives of closing the gap in achievement between White and minority students by the year 2014. Schools and districts will no longer be able to rely solely on the achievement of their highest performing students to determine success or failure. The NCLB mandates that schools and districts disaggregate test data for all students and subgroups within schools and then ensure that every group meets standard by the year 2014. The problem of closing achievement gap is an issue that is mystifying many principals and districts around the United States, and it is a problem that is mystifying for many high school principals and districts as well. Many high school principals are facing the challenge to decrease the high school dropout rate among minority students regardless of external factors that educators cannot control. Why has the longstanding issue of resolving the achievement gap become such an important and timely concern now? It has taken the creation of the NCLB by the federal government to bring national attention on the perpetual problem. However, school administrators are accepting responsibility for the challenge and have initiated efforts to find viable ways to close the gap especially through the secondary grades. This literature review begins with an examination of the historical perspective of the reasons for the gap as it relates to Blacks in the United States.

Historical Perspective: Reasons for the Black Achievement Gap

As far back as 1619 when the first slaves arrived in the colonies, the achievement gap between Blacks and Whites can be traced. Anderson (2004) states that “the laws against teaching slaves to read and write grew out of a variety of fears and concerns, the simplest of which concerned the use of literacy as a means to freedom” (p. 2). Anderson (2004) also gives significant insight into the extent of the achievement gap between Whites and slave were during the 1800s:

The first achievement gap that Blacks had to overcome was the “Literacy Gap.” As early as 1800 virtually all Whites in America were literate. Young White women, in a general population in which the median age was about 16, were just as literate in 1800 as White men. Both were approximately 90% literate. In contrast to the high rates of literacy among White Americans, Blacks were highly illiterate. Indeed, the Black illiteracy rate of approximately 90 percent in 1800 was the exact opposite of the White literacy rate of 90%. Although slavery and racial oppression were responsible for the astronomical gap in the Black-White literacy rate in 1800, it was nonetheless a major achievement gap that Blacks would struggle to overcome within and beyond slavery (p. 2).

Bullock (1967) showed a correlation between education and standards of society through a type of interracial permissiveness: “Many Southern Blacks were able to gain closer and more personal contact with the master class, acquire some degree of literacy, develop an unplanned-for leadership structure, and thereby experience upward mobility within Southern society by obtaining an education” (p. 4). Even though educating slaves was illegal many were educated in secret by Whites and other educated Blacks.

The Federal Government’s Handling of the Achievement Gap

The rebirth of NCLB began when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was reauthorized in 2001 by the Senate and House of Representatives.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson saw the need to enact legislation that would improve the education of all students especially those living in poverty. ESEA was integral to President Johnson's War on Poverty. When the legislation was announced, President Johnson stated "we [Americans] reach out to five and a half million children held behind their more fortunate schoolmates by the dragging anchor of poverty" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, p. 212). Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) write further:

Although passed at the crest of the civil rights revolution, ESEA was not a civil rights measure per se. But it disproportionately affected Black children, half of whom lived in poverty in 1965. In subsequent decades, the Latino population exploded, and by now, six out of ten students eligible for Title I assistance are either Black or Latino (p. 214).

Title I provided much-needed funds for high-poverty school districts, but according to the Coleman Report in 1966, more money was not necessarily the answer. James S. Coleman, the author of the Coleman Report, conducted a massive study of 600,000 schoolchildren and 60,000 teachers that revealed that it did not matter if students attended good schools (schools with all of the necessary materials and funding) or bad schools (schools without sufficient materials and funding). Instead, the achievement gap was related to family background. Students with similar family backgrounds had similar test scores, whether they came from a good or a bad school.

The 1970s and 1980s saw a decline in the confidence in American public schools. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued the now famous *A Nation At Risk* report:

We report to the American people that while we can take just take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being

eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur-others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments (p. 1).

It is evident that much has been done to address the underachievement of minority students in the United States over the years. Even though many efforts have been made to improve the academic performance of minority students in the United States, an achievement gap continues to exist.

The NAEP data show that minority eighth-grade students made progress in the 1970s and early 1980s and that there was some narrowing of a longstanding ethnic achievement gap at this grade level. The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) (Cooney & Bottoms, 2002) documented similar patterns in a recent study of middle grades student achievement in 14 Southern states. In addition to showing data that illustrated a wide gap between the performance of students in the highest and lowest quartiles, the data showed a wide gap between the performance of White and Black students in reading, mathematics, and science.

Factors Relating to Achievement Gap

Various reasons have been given for why there is an achievement gap, but none have been conclusive. One reason for achievement gap has been tracking. Tracking had a significant impact as contributor to the Black-White achievement gap. Oakes (2005) defines tracking as the process whereby students are divided into categories so that they can be assigned in groups to various kinds of classes. Oakes (2005) found that in a study of three high schools chosen to observe placement practices although most students took some vocational education, low-income Black and Latino students took more than others. Black and Latino students also took low-track academic courses more often than White

and Asian students (p. 231). Oakes (2005) mentions that when students are placed in these groups, predictable characteristics are created:

First, students are identified in a rather public way as to their intellectual capabilities and accomplishments and separated into a hierarchical system of groups for instruction. Second, these groups are labeled quite openly and characterized in the minds of teachers and others as being of a certain type- high ability, low achieving, slow, average, and so on. Clearly these groups are not equally valued in the school; occasional defensive responses and appearances of special privilege-i.e., small classes, programmed learning, the like for slower students- rarely mask the essential fact that they are less preferred. Third, individual students in these groups come to be defined by others-both adults and their peers- in terms of these group types. In other words, a student in a high-achieving group is seen as a high-achieving person, bright, smart, quick, and in the eyes of many, good. And those in the low-achieving groups come to be called slow, below average, and-often when people are being less careful-dummies, sweatshogs, or yahoos. Fourth, on the basis of these sorting decisions, the groupings of students that result, and the way educators see the students in these groups, teenagers are treated by and experience schools very differently (p. 4).

Another factor for the achievement gap is poverty. Poverty has been cited as one of the major reasons for the achievement gap between Black and White students. According to Payne (1996), poverty occurs in all races and in all countries.

In the 1990 census data, 11.5 million of America's children (individuals under the age of 18) lived in poverty. Of that number, the largest group was White. However, by percentage of ethnic groups, the highest percentages are minority. In addition to poverty, other factors contribute to the gap such as the following: family experience with education, cultural norms and values, racism, prejudice and segregation, inequities in school resources, school and teacher attitudes, student motivation and school environment (p. 2).

Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003), in a slightly different approach to studying the achievement gap, contend that the achievement gap that is often studied by researchers is a non-issue. They state that it has become popular to refer to one of the perennial

problems in education, that of low achievement by the large majority of Black students, as the achievement gap, that is, the gap in comparison to the average performance of White students. Perry, Steele, and Hillard (2003) state further:

The gap between the present level of performance for Black students and the criterion performance standards that should be required is the academic achievement gap that must be closed. Too often, by using the White students' normative performance as the universal standard, not only do we use a low standard, but we tend to be satisfied with the performance of minority cultural groups when a substantial reduction in this gap occurs. The unconscious assumption seems to be that the traditional low performers cannot surpass-merely approach-the performance of the norm group (p. 138).

Also, Rousseau and Tate (2003) noted Blacks students are frequently the victims of negative attitudes and lowered expectations from teachers, counselors, and administrators. Being the recipients of lowered expectations from school personnel, Black students often experience alienation and distancing in school which results to poor performance and increasing to dropping out of high school.

Achievement Gap Specific for High School

In addition to high school exit exams to measure adequate yearly progress, federal and state government agencies focus on high school graduation rate. For many states, students are tracked from the time they enter the 9th grade until they graduate within four years in a school district. Why are students leaving high school earlier? Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) surveyed students why they left high school before graduating. Many students responded: a lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school was boring; feeling unmotivated or not inspired to work hard; academic challenges like poor early grade preparation which resulted into failing in school; and the weight of

real world events like parenting and taking care of a family member. In addition, minority students and students from low-income families, especially in urban and rural areas with high concentration of poverty, had the lowest graduation rate (Stanley and Plucker 2008).

High school students believed that there are things in which schools can do to decrease the dropout rate. Some of these things are the new three R's of education reform: relationship, relevance, and rigor, implement programs that identify at-risk students as early as middle school, alternative education like non-traditional high schools, improve communication between parents, and increase community involvement by getting mentors for students. Other strategies to prevent the dropout rate in which state and national policymakers can do are increasing the legal dropout age and attaching driving privileges to school attendance and behavior (Knesting (2008); Bridgeland et al (2006); Stanley and Plucker (2008)).

Research Studies that Discuss the Achievement Gap

Bali and Alvarez (2004) conducted a study that controlled for factors other researchers discussed as contributing to the achievement gap (family background, school factors, socio-economic status, and language fluency). Particular care was taken to use a large sample of minority students (Black and Latino, including recent immigrants) to study how the gap develops between White and minority students.

A cohort of fourth grade students from the Pasadena Unified School District in Pasadena, California, who had been in this district since 1999 (first grade) were chosen in 2002 to participate in this study. These students also had test scores for all four years. This cohort consisted of 1,147 students for reading scores and 1,221 students for math

scores. The mean reading and math scores were examined from first through fourth grade for the fourth grade cohort. According to Bali and Alvarez (2004), the results from this study revealed the following:

In the first grade, the average reading score of Latino students is more than 13 points lower than that of White students, and Black students' average is over 6 points lower than that of White students. By fourth grade, Latinos' reading gaps are slightly reduced, by less than 1 point, whereas Black students' gap increased, by close to 2 points. There are some differences in math scores. In the first grade, both Latino and Black students average in math around 11 points below White students. By fourth grade, Latinos have reduced their gap in math, by close to 3 points, and Black students have slightly reduced it, by 1 point. Thus, in reading, the Black-White student gap increases; whereas the Latino-White gap slightly decreases; however, in math, an overall decrease in both the Black-White and Latino-White gaps is observed. It is important to note that in the raw scores Latino-White gaps are in general larger than the Black-White gaps (p. 399).

Schoenfeld (2002) analyzed data from schools in Pittsburgh that has 97 public schools that serve 40,000 students to determine if it is possible to significantly reduce the gap in mathematics achievement between White and minority student through educational measures such as implementing standards-based education in mathematics and other subject areas. Schoenfeld's (2002) results show that use of the reform curricula greatly reduced the gap between Whites and underrepresented minorities while increasing the performance of both groups in all categories.

Achievement Gap Nationally in Reading and in Mathematics for Blacks

The NAEP project known as the Nation's Report Card has been reporting student data every four years since 1971. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), the trends in average reading scale scores and score gaps for White students and Black students ages 9, 13, and 17 were all higher in 2009 than in 1971. However, a

comparison of the average reading scale scores of White and Black students at each age level indicates a remarkable gap in achievement. The scale that the NAEP uses to measure academic progress ranges is from 0 to 500, lowest scale score to highest scale score respectively.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), the average reading scale score for White 13-year-old students in 1971 compared to Black students of the same age was a difference of 39 points. Astonishingly, in 1988, the scores for reading for White and Black 13-year-old students appeared to have narrowed to a difference of 18 points. However, the most recent NAEP reading scores of White and Black 13-year-old students have a gap difference of 21 points.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), the 1971 reading scores for White and Black students in the 17-year-old group indicates the widest of the gaps of all age groups reported. The reading score for White 17-year-old students in 1971 compared to Blacks students of the same age was a difference of 53 points. From 1971 to 1980 the gap continued to average around 50 points. During the years between 1971 and 1980, Black reading scale scores increased slowly while White scores seemed to plateau. From 1980 to 1988, Black students reading scale scores dramatically increased by 31-points; whereas their counterparts continued to make minimal gains. Remarkably, in 1988, the gap in reading achievement between White and Black 17-year-old students appeared to have close to 20 points. But subsequently, the reading gap between White and Black 17-year-old students began to increase in 1990 to 20 points, then to 37 points in 1992, and most recently in 2004 the gap between White and Black 17-year-old students reading scale scores have declined to a difference of 29 points.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), in 1973, the mathematics achievement gap was by far the largest between White and Black 13-year-old students. The mathematic scale score difference of the aforementioned students was 46 points. In the year of 1990, there was a remarkable decrease in the mathematic gap between White and Black 17-year-old students. The difference was 21 points. The most recent mathematic scale score in 2004 showed a slight increase in the mathematic gap between White and Black 17-year-old students. The mathematic scale score difference was 28 points.

Since this study is about the achievement gap between Black and White students in two high schools within a Southeastern county school district in the United States, it is essential to review the average scale scores for reading and mathematics in state for which this county lies for grade 8. According to National Center for Education Statistics (2009), the average reading score for the state in which the Southeastern county school district, White eighth grade students is 271 and the average reading scale score for Black eighth grade students is 246 – a difference of 25 points. In addition to the reading scale scores, the National Center for Education Statistics (2009) reported that the average scale scores for the state White eighth grade students in mathematics is 289 and that the average scale scores for the state Black eighth grade students in mathematics is 262- a difference of 27 points. Both reading and mathematics scale scores are consistent with national averages.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) review of national trends provided by National Center for Education Statistics (2009) indicates that the gap in achievement between White and minority students continues to widen at each age and

grade level. The achievement gap between White and minority students in early grades is indicative to the testing data for 17-year-old high school students in the state in which the Southeastern county lies. The academic achievement of Black and other minority students both nationally and in the state in which the Southeastern county lies is in keeping with the observations made by Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003):

Today, at age 17 the typical Black or Latino student is scoring less well on the nation's most reliable tests than at least 80 percent of his or her White classmates. In five of the seven subjects tested by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a majority of Black students perform in the lowest category- below basic. The result: By twelfth grade, Blacks are typically four years behind White and Asian students, while Latinos are doing only a tad better than Black students. These students are finishing high school with a junior high education (p.2).

Haycock (2001, p.7) statistically noted an achievement gap trend between races in 1999, 1 in 100 Black 17-year-olds can read and gather information from a specialized text (such as a science article in a magazine) compared to 1 in 12 White students. 1 in 100 Black students can comfortably solve multi-step problems compared to 1 in 10 White students. The ratio of Black students to White students who are able to compute fractions, solve percents, and calculate averages were 30 percent to 70 percent. In the 18-24 age group, 90 percent of Whites have either completed high school or earned a GED while the percentage of Black drops to 81.

Effective Schools: Promising Achievement Gap Closing Strategies

Presently, there is little publication specifically relating to strategies that high school principals use to close the minority achievement gap. However, there is available research that identifies commonalities that principals utilize to close the achievement gap between White and other minority subgroups within schools, especially low-performing schools. Some common practices of principals who have been successful in closing the

achievement gap are high expectations for all stakeholders within the school, an established strong and consistent discipline program, regular assessment and use of data to ensure continuous achievement, employment and empowerment of highly qualified teachers, belief that all students can learn, support given to the learning process (remediation), and setting measurable goals for the school (Oberman & Symonds, 2005, Bainbridge & Tocco, 2003; Butcher & Kafer, 2003; Brynjulson & Storms, 2005).

The Association for Effective Schools, Inc. (1996) has outlined many of the same strategies in its correlates of effective schools. *Effective schools* refer to schools where all students learn regardless of the diversity and multicultural populations of the students and the teachers in the schools. The Association for Effective Schools (1996) believes the following:

The correlates are the means to high and equitable levels of student learning. It is expected that all children (whether male or female, rich or poor, Black or White) will learn at least the essential knowledge, concepts and skills needed so that they can be successful at the next level next year (<http://www.mes.org/correlates.html>).

The correlates as defined by the Association for Effective Schools (1996) include a clear school mission, high expectations for success, instructional leadership, frequent monitoring of student progress, opportunity to learn and student time on task, a safe and orderly environment, and home school relations. Additionally, the Association for Effective Schools (1996) states that when school improvement processes based upon the effective schools research are implemented, the proportions of students that achieve academic excellence either improves or at the very least remains the same.

Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) conducted an 8-year study from 1992 to 2000 of the Brazoport Independent School District in Clute, Texas on closing the achievement gap

between White and minority students. The district was required to disaggregate student results of the Texas Assessment of Achievement Skills (TAAS) and use passing rate by subgroups such as economically disadvantaged or minority students to determine school success. Because Brazoport operates on a site-based management plan, the responsibility for improvement was placed on each principal and the staff in his or her building. The Brazoport school district utilized Deming's 14-step Total Quality Management (TQM) process that focuses on the quality of goods and services provided by an organization. One of the key elements of Total Quality Management (TQM) is the use of data to guide improvements. Brazoport used TAAS data to identify problems and to plan improvements. Another element of TQM is team-based problem solving. The district used this approach in all schools to address the issue of low TAAS pass rates. The district changed the mind set by adopting a no-excuses attitude toward failure; they did not accept any of the traditional reasons for minority failure. Everyone realized that they were accountable for student success or failure. In addition to using TQM, Brazoport also incorporated Effective Schools correlates and committed to provide related training for staff.

According to Cawelti and Protheroe (2001), Brazoport implemented an 8-step instructional process that was a modification of the Plan-Do-Check-Act approach of TQM. The 8-step instructional process consists the following:

1. Disaggregate Data: Teachers received individual student and classroom reports on TAAS results for both their previous year's classroom and the students they will teach during the current year. Principals received the same information. Data are also available from periodic assessments developed by teachers in the district.
2. Develop a timeline: Based on both the knowledge and skills in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills and the assessment data available from the

TAAS, grade-level teachers develop an objective-based teaching calendar for the year.

3. Deliver instructional focus: The instructional focus, the objective, is announced and taught at the beginning of each day or class period.
4. Administer an assessment: Assessments, some commercially developed and many developed by district teachers, are administered periodically to ensure that students have mastered the objectives taught during the specified time period. Data from these assessments are used to determine if whole classes need additional reteaching or if special assistance is needed for specific students. The approach is intended to help teachers detect and correct problems early (p.22)

Based on assessment data, Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) recommend that students should be grouped into enrichment activities or tutorials to ensure success.

5. Enrichment activities are provided for those students whose short-term Assessment shows they have mastered the skills just taught. They are scheduled during the time other students are involved with tutorials.
6. Tutorials to reteach are provided to students who have not mastered the Objectives just assessed. The tutorials typically include fewer students than a regular class. Help is also provided after school and on Saturdays.
7. Maintain and reteach: Teachers include short, periodic reteaching/maintenance activities in their instruction to ensure that skills already taught are retained.
8. Monitor: Principals visit classrooms during the time allotted for the instructional focus to monitor progress and to maintain knowledge of the progress of individual students and classes (p. 24).

Within this extensive 8-year study of the Brazport Independent School District, the researchers interviewed principals of the various schools to obtain information on how they made improvements to reading, writing, and mathematic scores in their school.

Within the interviews, the principals discussed how they budgeted effectively to utilize any additional funds allocated from the central office for extended day programs for at-risk learners and how they disaggregated test data to plan for instructions.

Perry, Steele, and Hillard (2003) discuss how they are several examples of schools that have closed the achievement gap among the majority and minority students. They state:

There is no mystery. There has never been a time in American education when there have not been gap closers, that is, teachers and school leaders who demonstrate their capability to move students who typically perform in the lower quartile by standardized tests measures even into the top quartile, indeed in some cases into the lead position within their schools and districts (p. 142).

Perry, Steele, and Hillard discuss the fact that educators, who have a strong belief in closing the achievement gap do not standby wondering about the intelligence of students, but they are more concerned with the learning opportunities provided for students to be successful academically.

According to Jordan, McPartland, Legters, and Balfanz (2000), if a large high school with a high poverty student population has major problems of absenteeism, low test scores, and high drop-out rates, the only solution is a powerful comprehensive school reform which can turn the school around and keep it strong. The comprehensive school reform intends to affect every aspect of school functioning, such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, school organization, necessary support for students having difficulties, parental involvement, and sustained professional development for the staff. Comprehensive school reform shares the goal of systemic school reform – improved student achievement on a broad scale – which promotes positive human relationships and effective learning opportunities (2000).

One model of comprehensive school reform, called the Talent Development Model, was designed to address the problem of large, urban, nonselective high schools. It was researched and developed at John Hopkins University and implemented in Patterson High School in Baltimore. The Talent Development Model contains two organizational reform components. The first is the Academy structure, which reduces student apathy and

anonymity by creating smaller, more personalized learning communities. The upper grades choose a career focus for their curriculum. The second component is the Twilight School, which provides recovery opportunities for students with serious discipline problems (Jordan et al., 2000, p.164-165). Outcomes of the career academies have reported positive results. Such positive results include improvement of the graduation rate, attendance rates, grades, and attendance to 2-and 4-year colleges and universities (Shorr & Hon, 1999 & Elliott, Lawrence, & Gilroy, 2002).

Dolejs (2006), a Research Associate for the National Center for Educational Accountability, released a report highlighting the ways in which many superintendents, principals, teachers, and students in successful high schools manage to maintain standards of excellence for all students, pursuing high academic standards while still closing the achievement gap. Using a case study methodology, NCEA visited 74 average and higher performing high schools in 10 states “with populations ranging from 260 to 4,600 students; with populations of at-risk students and gifted students; schools that were entirely Black or Hispanic or White or up to 66% Asian, and a variety of compositions in between; as well as schools with as many as 62% English learners, and up to 96% economically disadvantaged students who lived in rural, suburban, and urban schools” (p.2) to identify the fundamental teaching and learning practices shared across higher performing high schools. The fundamental teaching and learning practices are (2006, p.4): 1) Setting Standards: Curriculum and academic goals; 2) Building capacity for high school improvement and ensuring quality teachers: staff selection, leadership, and capacity building; 3) Reaching more students: Instructional programs, practices, and arrangements; 4) Facilitating informed decision-making: Monitoring: Compilation,

analysis, and use of data; and 5) Supporting data-responsive actions: Recognition, intervention, and adjustment. School districts that utilize and implement entirely these research-based practices that are routinely observed in high schools that consistently outperform comparable schools may find encouraging gains in performance and fulfill the promise of a quality education for all students.

Effective Leaders and Closing the Achievement Gap

Several researchers suggested that principals have a positive impact on variety of in-school factors and those have an indirect effect on student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Bell, J.A., 2001; Witziers, Bosker & Kruger, 2003). Given the importance of the principalship and the tremendous demands of the job, school leaders must continue to learn about factors that can positively impact student learning. Witziers and colleagues noted that the principal's behavior might affect student achievement through an open school climate and organization.

Hale and Rollings (2006) studied how 25 high schools who served a large numbers of students who are potentially at risk of failure narrowed their achievement gap. The student population consists of at least 50% underrepresented minority students, with a minimum of 50% of the students qualifying for either free or reduced-price meals. These schools had at least 90% of their students to graduate from high school and were accepted into a postsecondary education program. The experiences and practices of these high schools answer the question: How do principals transform schools and foster powerful teaching and learning for all students?

Hale and Rollings (2006) discuss five major strategies that help principals transform schools to a powerful teaching and learning environment for all students. The strategies are (pp. 5-9):

1. Engaging teachers: creating a supportive environment for learning in public; establishing nonnegotiable, such as goals and standards; holding teachers accountable; and using a mix of leadership actions which can best be categorized as “intangibles.”
2. Improving student engagement: creating higher levels of student participation and giving students extra support for learning.
3. Working on many fronts: having strategies in place to help teachers raise their expectations and believe that their students can achieve at high levels; provide data-driven professional development so that teachers could learn how to evaluate standard tests scores so that teacher could understand where and on whom their energies are best spent
4. Having strong connections with stakeholders: build strong relationships with parents and the community selling the vision of higher expectations.
5. Leading with head and heart: leaders use diverse instructional and interpersonal strategies to engage and support in-school constituencies – students and teachers. Leaders have instructional, managerial, and organizational acumen, but they driven by integrity, ethics, moral courage, and personal strength.

With these strategies “Breakthrough” High School principals’ inspiration and enthusiasm convinced reluctant teachers and students that all students could achieve to high

standards. And they persuaded parents and entire communities that higher expectations were in everyone's best interest (Hale & Rollins, 2006, p. 9).

Perspective of the Influence of a Diverse Staff

A major concern in education is predicting who will be teaching our young children. As early as the mid 1980s, educators knew that the American public school system does not have enough minority teachers to meet the proportion of minority students in its classroom. The presence of minority teachers in the classroom will have a positive influence on the minority student population. Minority teachers serve as role models for minority and majority students. Public schools influence children's opinion about society and their own futures. Lack of having minority teachers tells the children something about authority and power in contemporary America which influences their attitudes toward school, their academic accomplishments, and their self-worth for higher achievement. Also, minority teachers may be better able to meet the learning needs of minority students and may improve the academic achievement and graduation rate of minority students (Brown & Uhlenberg, 2002; Salinas, 2002). However, with the need to give students someone whom they can identify with and the need for all students to improve the basic skill of relating to individuals from different racial, linguistics, and economic backgrounds, there are few minorities entering into the teaching profession. The teaching profession is in competition with corporate America. Many minorities who go to college are in high demand from other fields that have a strong desire to diversity the workforce, pays a lot more and are well respected as a profession (Chaika 2004).

Summary

For decades researchers have discussed and debated the lower levels of educational achievement of Black students compared with White students. The gap is evident in test scores, graduation rates, and appears across all school ages. The gap in achievement between Black and White students were created by an educational system that was unfair and unequal; however, the U.S. federal government is taking major action to close the achievement gap between White and minority students by the year 2014.

Researchers have suggested several factors why the achievement gap exists and persists, but cannot provide a definite answer for the problem. Some researchers suggest that some of the factors are student related like poverty, family and community support, and negative peer pressure. And other factors that involve school are lack of high expectations, a rigor curriculum, extra help for students, highly qualified teachers who are provided with professional development, quality instructional, and a culturally diverse staff.

Through all the negative factors, researchers seem to parallel the ideology that there are schools and districts that have been successful in narrowing the achievement gap between Black and White students. These schools and districts follow a systemic plan of action that involves identifying the problems by disaggregating data, provide professional development to train teachers in the areas of need within their school, implement instructions that focus on improving the students, providing extra support for students, provide adequate funding to accomplish school improvement efforts, parental and community involvement, and accept a no excuses approach to closing the achievement by

all school and district employees. With the implementation and follow through of gap closing strategies, the outcome is a win-win situation for all students.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

It has been over 50 years since the desegregation of public schools. The purpose of desegregation was to provide equality and equity in education for the Black students (Ikpa 2004). The results of achievement tests during segregation indicated that Black children lagged behind White children. Even though progress of narrowing the achievement gap has been made in the past, Black students are still performing lower on standardized tests than White students (Young, Wright, & Laster 2005; Olneck 2005; Ikpa 2004). Therefore, Black students graduate at a lower rate than White students (Haycock, 1997). With the legislation mandate, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, many school systems are challenged with implementing standards-based reform to close the achievement gap among all students regardless of race and socioeconomic status. The purpose of the study was to examine how school administrators, members of the Board of Education, teachers and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States. Chapter three is an overview of the purpose of the study, the research question and a description of the research design, setting, participants, interview development, the procedures, and data analysis.

Research Question

How do school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers, and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States?

Research Design

The researcher conducted a qualitative case study to determine how school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States. This research design provides multiple perspectives that would paint a picture that is thorough, accurate, and vivid on the perception of the achievement gap in a Southeastern school district in the United States. Qualitative research is concerned with non-statistical methods of inquiry and analysis of social phenomena. It draws on an inductive process in which themes and categories emerge through analysis of data collected by such techniques as interviews, observations, videotapes, and case studies. Samples are usually small and are often purposively selected. Qualitative research uses detailed descriptions from the perspective of the research participants themselves as a means of examining specific issues and problems under study. Therefore, a qualitative study can gain a more in-depth understanding of the respondent's beliefs, attitudes, or situation and is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). This case study gathered in-depth data specific to the high schools in a Southeastern school district in the United States in closing the achievement gap between Black and White high school students.

In this study, the researcher conducted semi-structured "Elite" interviews with five school leader participants, Superintendent, two high school principals, and two Board of Education members, who have influences on educational practices and policies implemented to close the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States, four high school teachers, two focus

group of four high school students each to identify trends in the perceptions and opinions expressed about the overall research question (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), “An elite interview is a specialized case of interviewing that focuses on a particular type of interviewee. “Elite” individuals are those considered to be influential, prominent, and/or well-informed people in an organization or community; they are selected for interviews on the basis of their expertise in areas relevant to the research” (p. 113). In addition, the face-to-face interview allowed the researcher to establish rapport with the interviewees, and therefore, gain their cooperation; this allowed the researcher the flexibility if the interviewee’s responses suggest the need for additional probes or lines of inquiry in future interviews (Marshall and Rossman, 2006).

Background

The county population of this Southeastern school district in the United States is approximately 70% white, 30% black, and 5% of Hispanic. In addition, the county is comprised of approximately 30% of individuals who are age 18 or younger and approximately 15% of individuals who are 65 or older. Total households with children under 18 represented approximately 30% of all households with approximately 10% of the households headed by females with children under 18 years of age (www.dca.state.ga.us).

With an average student population of approximately 13,000, this Southeastern school district in the United States spent an average of \$7,000 per student for public education each year between 2001 and 2009. The district has two high schools. Both schools have an average enrollment of 1800. Both schools have an average student ratio population of

Whites to Blacks of 60% to 40%. The average number of students who are economically disadvantaged is approximately 40%. However, the average high school dropout rate between 2001 and 2005 was reported to be approximately 8% for all students in grades 9 to 12; with the state average at 5%. Also, the average high school dropout rate for Black students was 9% and for White students was 7%. Based on the 2004 graduating class for this Southeastern school district in the United States, approximately 78% of the students were eligible for the HOPE Scholarship Program which includes technical, 2-year, and 4-year post secondary education. This Southeastern county in the United States has one institution of higher education. Based on the enrollment for 2009-2010, only 43% of the student population is made of residents within this county, having approximately 70% of White students and 30% of Black students (www.dca.state.ga.us).

According to the 2000 Census, during 1999 approximately 15% of the county's population lived below the poverty level with approximately 22% of the children under the age of 18 lived below the level of poverty. In 2004, the average weekly wage per household was approximately \$610; the average per capita personal income was approximately \$32,000; and the median household income was approximately \$38,800. The main employment sector for this Southeastern school district in the United States is the service producing industry (www.census.gov and www.dca.state.ga.us).

Participants

The participants for this study were the Superintendent, two high school administrators, two Board of Education members, a focus group of four high school teachers who teach core academics, English, Math, Science and Social Studies, and two focus groups composed of four at-risk high school students each who failed any portion

of the High School Graduation exit exam on the first attempt or may have any indication of dropping out of school. The district has seven Board of Education Members and two high schools. The two high schools have seven administrators each, two principals and five assistant principals. Each school has an average of 100 teachers on faculty and an average of 1800 students enrolled. The Superintendent and the two high school principals were selected because they are the educational leaders of these entities. Two Board of Education members, high school teachers and students were purposively selected to voluntarily participate in the study. The two Board of Education members were selected to participate based on their position and years on the board. The high school teachers who had taught ten or more years within the school district were asked to voluntarily participate. The researcher used stratified random sampling of the students by sex and race who were identified by their principal to ensure different perspectives and who would be insightful and articulate. The sample included a Superintendent, high school administrators (n=2), a focus group of high school teachers (n=4), Board of Education members (n=2), and two focus group of at-risk high school students (n=8).

Interview Development

The researcher developed nine open-ended questions that will lead to more questions during the interview process per “Elite” individuals and focus groups. The interview questions were gleaned from the literature review about issues on the achievement gap and from test scores and demographic data collected from the Georgia Department of Education Report Card website about each high school. The following table shows the review of literature that corresponds to the developed interview questions:

Table 3.1

Interview Questions

Interview Questions	Review of Literature
1. What factors, in your opinion, contribute the most to the achievement gap between Black and White high school students?	Bali and Alvarez (2004); Bridgeland et al (2006); Rousseau and Tate (2003); Oakes (2005)
2. What do you consider your role in closing the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in your school district?	Oberman & Symonds (2005); Cawelti and Protheroe (2001); Jordan et al (2000; Shorr & Hon (1999); Elliott et al (2002); Dolejs (2006); Hale and Rollings (2006)
3. What effect do you believe the achievement gap has on high school students?	Knesting (2008); Bridgeland et al (2006); Stanley and Plucker (2008)
4. What effect does the achievement gap between Black and White high school students have on our community or society at large?	Payne (2006)
5. What do you see as the biggest barriers to closing the achievement gap between Black and White High School students in your school district?	Bullock (1967); Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003); Payne (1996); Perry, Steele, & Hillard (2003); Bali and Alvarez (2002); Schoenfeld (2002); Haycock (2001)
6. How aware do you believe educators, students, and the general public is of the achievement gap between Black and White students?	Hale and Rollings (2006); Bridgeland et al (2006)
7. What do high schools do to try to narrow the achievement gap between Black and White high school students?	Oberman & Symonds (2005); Cawelti and Protheroe (2001); Jordan et al (2000; Shon & Hon (1999); Elliott et al (2002); Dolejs (2006); Hale and Rollings (2006); Brown & Uhlenberg (2002); Salinas (2002)
8. Given the achievement gap between Black and White high school students, what could high schools do to strengthen the academic performance of Black students?	Perry, Steele, Hillard (2003); Jordan et al (2000); Shon & Hon (1999); Elliott et al (2002); Dolejs (2006)

9. What is the likelihood that the achievement gap between Black and White high school students may be closed in the next 10-20 years?	<i>No Child Left Behind Act of 2001</i>
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Procedures

Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at Georgia Southern University, the researcher contacted the participants for voluntarily participation in the study. After confirmation of participating, an interview was scheduled and a consent form was signed prior to the interview by each participant and a guardian or parent of each high school student. The participants were informed that the interviews would last approximately 60-90 minutes. The data for this study was collected by conducting an in-depth audio-taped interview with each participant and each focus group. Each participant and each focus group responded to approximately nine semi-structured, open-ended interview questions to gather as much information from each participant on his or her perception on the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States. A description of how each group was interviewed follows.

Superintendent, High School Principals, and Board of Education Members Interviews.

The researcher contacted each educational leader and policy maker by emailing or via telephone explaining and asking for voluntarily participation in the study. After confirmation of participating, an interview was scheduled and a consent form was signed prior to the interview. The researcher interviewed each educational leader and policy maker separately. The interviews began with a brief review of the purpose of the research, an assurance of confidentiality, and description of participant's rights. During

the interview, to help ensure understanding of interviewee responses, the researcher repeated answers and use probing questions to seek clarification. The researcher transcribed the notes from the interview into a Word document after each interview had been concluded. The researcher returned interview transcripts to each participant for feedback and clarification, if necessary. The data collected from each participant was stored on the researcher's laptop and on a flash drive, secured with password access only. The audiotapes from the interviews were securely stored at the home of the researcher. None of the data collected or audiotapes would be accessible by anyone other than the researcher or the researcher's committee members. At the conclusion of all the interviews data were analyzed to answer the research question.

Teacher Focus Group Interviews. The researcher contacted core academic high school teachers at both high schools via email explaining and asking for voluntarily participants in study. After confirmation of participating, a focus group interview was scheduled and a consent form was signed prior to the interview. At the beginning of the interview the researcher reviewed the purpose of the research, an assurance of confidentiality, and description of participant's rights. In addition, as a facilitator, the researcher set up ground rules (only one person talking at a time, respect others' comments). The researcher started the session with each teacher introducing themselves so that everyone is feeling comfortable talking. At the end of the session each participant of the focus group was asked to speak and summarize his or her position on the topic (Morgan 1997). The researcher transcribed the notes from the interview into a Word document after each interview had been concluded. The researcher structured a coding process to assure that

anonymity of participants is protected. At the conclusion of all the interviews, data were analyzed to answer the research question.

Student Focus Group Interviews. The researcher contacted each student who was identified as failing any portion of the High School Graduation Exit exam on the first attempt or may have any indication of dropping out of school. From the identified group of students, the researcher used stratified random sampling of the students to include a variety of sex and race to participate to ensure different perspectives. After getting parents and students permission to participate in the interview, a common group time was scheduled to conduct the interview. The group of students met in a room within the school facility. At the beginning of the interview the researcher reviewed the purpose of the research, an assurance of confidentiality, and description of participant's rights. In addition, as a facilitator, the researcher set up ground rules (only one person talking at a time, respect others' comments). The researcher started the session with each student introducing themselves so that everyone is feeling comfortable talking. At the end of the session each participant of the focus group was asked to speak and summarize his or her position on the topic (Morgan 1997). The researcher transcribed the notes from the interview into a Word document after each interview had been concluded. The researcher structured a coding process to assure that anonymity of participants is protected. At the conclusion of all the interviews data were analyzed to answer the research question.

Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed the audiotapes and identified common or reoccurring themes and trends that arose from the participants' responses to the interview questions about the achievement gap between Black and White high school students and from the

focus groups of students' and teachers' responses to the interview questions. The researcher used the Creswell Data Analysis spiral to analyze the data for *triangulation of this study* [italics added]. Creswell (1998) developed the following steps for analyzing data from a qualitative study: (1) Organize the data by using note cards; (2) Read in detail the entire data set multiple times to develop possible data themes or categories for interpretation first among the educational leaders and policy makers and then with the focus group; (3) After identifying general categories or themes among each group of interviewees, the researcher classifies each piece of data to develop a deeper sense of understanding of what the data means; and (4) the researcher integrates and summarizes the data for others to reviews. Data comparisons of the responses to each interview question were made between all groups. State testing and graduation rate data as well were collected from Georgia Department of Education and analyzed.

Summary

Many United States public school systems have been battling with the achievement gap between Black and White students. It has been over 50 years since desegregation, and evidence from data still shows that Black children are still lagging behind White children on standardized tests and graduation from high school. Within a Southeastern school district in the United States, two high schools struggle to close the achievement gap between Black and White students. Some critics of public schools believe that these factors impact school success: safe and orderly environment within the schools, instructional strategies, and home atmosphere. Other factors may be high expectations for success, frequent monitoring of student progress, opportunity to learn and student time on task, and representation of minorities on faculty. In addition to factors that are controlled

by schools, there are factors that are contributed by students that affect student achievement gap, especially high school graduation. Some factors are socioeconomic status; a lack of connection the school environment, a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and the weight of real world events.

This chapter includes a restatement of the research questions, the research design, instrumentation, procedures, participants, and methods of analysis. The design of this study is qualitative to provide a deeper understanding of how school administrators, members of the Board of Education, high school teachers, and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with school administrators and board members and from a focus group of high school teachers and from two focus groups of at-risk high school students. Interview responses were recorded, analyzed, and written in narrative form for reporting. In addition, state testing and graduation rate data were collected from Georgia Department of Education and analyzed.

CHAPTER FOUR

REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to determine on the perceptions of school administrators, members of the Board of Education, high school teachers and high school students on the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States. The study used only qualitative data. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews from the Superintendent of Schools, two high school administrators, two Board of Education members, four academic high school teachers, and two focus groups of four high school students each in a Southeastern school district in the United States.

Research Question

How do school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers, and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States?

Research Design

This chapter reports the findings of the study through data analysis of interviews conducted with the Superintendent of Schools, school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers and high school students. Georgia High School Graduation Test data, Graduation Rate data, Adequate Yearly Progress data, and demographic information for the high schools in a Southeastern school district in the United States are presented in tables collected from the Georgia Department of Education as well. The names of the school administrators, Board of Education members, high

school teachers, and high school students interviewed for this study will remain anonymous and coded in Table 4.1. The information resulting from the participants was organized by the themes and patterns that emerged from the interviewee's response per group of participants.

Table 4.1

Coding of the Participants

Name	Role	Gender	Race
S1	Superintendent	M	W
B1	Board Member	M	W
B2	Board Member	F	B
A1	Principal	M	W
A2	Principal	F	B
T1	English Teacher	F	B
T2	Math Teacher	F	W
T3	Science Teacher	F	W
T4	Social Studies Teacher	F	B
S1	Student	F	B
S2	Student	F	W
S3	Student	M	B
S4	Student	M	B
S5	Student	F	B
S6	Student	F	W
S7	Student	M	B
S8	Student	M	W

Demographic Data

The county population of this Southeastern school district in the United States is approximately 70% white, 30% black, and 5% of Hispanic. In addition, the county is comprised of approximately 30% of individuals who are age 18 or younger and approximately 15% of individuals who are 65 or older. Total households with children under 18 represented approximately 30% of all households with approximately 10% of

the households headed by females with children under 18 years of age (www.dca.state.ga.us).

With an average student population of approximately 13,000, this Southeastern school district in the United States spent an average of \$7,000 per student for public education each year between 2001 and 2005. The district has two high schools. Both schools have an average enrollment of 1800. Both schools have an average student ratio population of Whites to Blacks of 60% to 40%. The average number of students who are economically disadvantaged is approximately 40%. The average high school dropout rate between 2001 and 2005 was reported to be approximately 8% for all students in grades 9 to 12, noting the state average during this same time is 5%. Also, the average district high school dropout rate for Black students was 9% and for White students was 7%. Based on the 2004 graduating class for this Southeastern school district in the United States, approximately 78% of the students were eligible for the HOPE Scholarship Program. This Southeastern county in the United States has one institution of higher education. Based on the enrollment for 2009-2010, only 43% of that college's student population is made of residents within this county. The college demographics show a student population of 70% of White students and 30% of Black students (www.dca.state.ga.us).

According to the 2000 Census, during 1999 approximately 15% of the county's population lived below the poverty level with approximately 22% of the children under the age of 18 lived below the level of poverty. In 2004, the average weekly wage per household was approximately \$600; the average per capita personal income was approximately \$32,000; and the median household income was approximately \$39,000.

The main employment sector for this Southeastern school district in the United States is the service producing industry (www.census.gov and www.dca.state.ga.us).

Demographic Profiles and Data 2003 – 2009 of High Schools in School District

The data in table 4.1 shows the average student enrollment, student population percentage by race, average eligible free/reduced lunch, and teacher population percentage by race for both high schools in the Southeastern school district in the United States. Even though the racial composition is equal, the number of students at high school 1 more students eligible for free/reduced lunch than high school 2. The ratio of Black teachers to White teachers at both high schools is almost equal.

Table 4.2

Demographic Profiles of High Schools in the Southeastern School District

2003 – 2009 School Years	High School 1	High School 2
Avg. Student Enrollment	1800	1800
% Black Students	40%	40%
% White Students	60%	60%
Average Eligible Free/Reduced Lunch	42%	33%
% of Black Teachers	12%	10%
% of White Teachers	88%	90%

The data in table 4.2 shows the percentages of Black and White high school students passing the Reading and Math High School Graduation Test, the percentage of students graduating, and AYP (adequate yearly progress) status from 2003 to 2009 school years. At high school 1, the White students scored approximately 20% higher than Black students on the math and approximately 8% higher than Black students on the reading.

White students graduated at a rate approximately 6% higher than Black students. Since NCLB has been in effect, this school has made AYP only 2 out of the 6 school terms.

Table 4.3

High School Graduation Test and Graduation Rate Data – High School 1

Subject	Subgroups	2003- 2004	2004- 2005	2005- 2006	2006- 2007	2007- 2008	2008- 2009
Math	ALL	69.9	73.2	70.8	77.3	72.0	79.9
	BLACK	56.0	62.7	57.9	62.6	58.2	65.8
	WHITE	78.1	82.5	77.5	84.4	79.4	90.0
Reading	ALL	87.9	89.8	88.1	89.3	89.0	92.9
	BLACK	84.3	87.2	85.3	83.5	80.6	87.7
	WHITE	90.1	93.0	90.8	91.9	93.5	97.3
Graduation Rate	ALL	48.6	49.0	53.1	60.0	62.6	67.4
	BLACK	45.3	40.2	52.7	50.6	54.2	68.6
	WHITE	51.1	54.2	54.0	64.6	66.9	65.3
AYP		N	Y	N	Y	N	N

Note. Adapted from the Georgia Department of Education Website.

<http://www.doe.k12.ga.us>

The data in table 4.3 shows the percentages of Black and White high school students passing the Reading and Math High School Graduation Test, the percentage of students graduating, and AYP (adequate yearly progress) status from 2003 to 2009 school years. At high school 2, the White students scored approximately 40% higher than Black students on the math and approximately 16% higher than Black students on the reading. White students graduated at a rate approximately 30% higher than Black students. Since NCLB has been in effect, this school has made AYP only 2 out of the 6 school terms.

Table 4.4

High School Graduation Test and Graduation Rate Data – High School 2

Subject	Sub-groups	2003- 2004	2004- 2005	2005- 2006	2006- 2007	2007- 2008	2008- 2009
Math	ALL	76.3	80.3	79.4	85.1	79.0	90.9
	BLACK	47.0	52.2	53.9	67.9	52.1	77.4
	WHITE	87.1	91.8	90.1	90.9	90.8	96.4
Reading	ALL	88.6	90.6	90.4	96.8	89.3	97.5
	BLACK	67.5	75.6	79.8	96.2	75.0	94.0
	WHITE	96.4	97.0	95.5	98.6	96.1	99.1
Graduation Rate	ALL	56.8	64.8	70.0	70.0	70.9	75.9
	BLACK	31.8	45.6	47.9	48.7	55.6	65.2
	WHITE	69.8	74.3	83.6	81.3	80.7	83.5
AYP		N	N	N	Y	N	Y

Note. Adapted from the Georgia Department of Education Website.

<http://www.doe.k12.ga.us>

Overview of Themes by Group

How do school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers, and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States? The following themes emerged by groups:

Superintendent

Factors that Contribute to Achievement Gap

- Parental Involvement
- Socioeconomic Status
- Single Family Parent – Working Mothers
- Change of Values

Effect of Achievement Gap

- Lack of Skills – Need Career Technical
- Future Economics

Ways to Close the Achievement Gap

- Relationships and Addressing Needs of the student
- More Minority Role Models
- Guidance and Monitor Progress
- Offering more Alternative Opportunities to earning a high school diploma
- “Sensitivity Program”- In-service Educators
- Provide incentives to students

Barriers to Closing the Achievement Gap

- Improving Parental Involvement
- “More accommodating to one another and not be divided ” - “Understanding needs.”

Principal

Factors that Contribute to Achievement Gap

- Home Situation - Community
- Lack of Support
- Lack of expectations for Black Students
- Begins before high school – students are labeled
- Opportunity exposure prior to high school
- Parental Involvement
- Education level of parents

Effect of Achievement Gap

- Students become frustrated and drop out.
- Students enter into high school not prepared. Reading level is low; therefore, cannot pass graduation test.
- Increase cycle of poverty and crime.
- Mediocre diploma

Ways to Close the Achievement Gap

- Providing more opportunities – tutoring, technical skills
- Relationship
- Small classroom settings
- Identify the level of the students (early intervention)
- Mentors and be Role Models
- In-service teachers on Cultural differences
- High Expectations

Barriers to Closing the Achievement Gap

- Fragmented Black Community
- Students' internal drive
- Few mentors
- Disproportionate number of Black teachers and administrators
- Lack of parental involvement
- Student's home life

Board of Members

Factors that Contribute to Achievement Gap

- Parental Involvement
- Peer Pressure
- Discipline Issues in Schools
- Environment that they live in
- TV's Programs and Music that affect academic focus
- Values at home about education

Effect of Achievement Gap

- Lack of motivation; lower self-esteem
- Future earnings
- Gap in high school is a microcosm of society
- Perception that Black kids are less academically capable

Ways to Close the Achievement Gap

- Offer more opportunities – Career Academy; Night High School
- Hire more Black teachers
- Offer more extracurricular activities
- Proactive in Communication – with the Community
- Setting Goals
- Setting Expectations for kids
- Listen to Professional Educators to provide budget and policies that provide variety of opportunities for success.

Barriers to Closing the Achievement Gap

- Lack of parental involvement

High School Teachers

Factors that Contribute to Achievement Gap

- Stereotyping
- Socioeconomic Status
- Teachers not having high expectations of Black students
- Lack of Parental Involvement
- Slow academic start
- Teenage Pregnancy
- Education Level of Parents and Parental Motivation
- Home life issues
- Previous experiences in school
- Lack of self-motivation
- Poor reading skills
- Peer Pressure
- Student Work Ethic
- Absenteeism

Effect of Achievement Gap

- If issue not addressed, society as a whole will suffer.
- Hurts all students
- Increase of Poverty and Increase Crime
- Higher dropout rate

- Self-fulfilling prophecy
- Continued cycle of poverty
- Limited skills and job opportunity

Ways to Close the Achievement Gap

- Mentor Programs
- Extra Support – tutoring
- Encouragement – Develop Relationships
- Career Opportunities – Technical Skills
- Track Progress – Early Intervention
- Specialized Programs
- Smaller group
- More minority teachers
- Good role model
- Have high expectations for all students

Barriers to Closing the Achievement Gap

- Raising the expectation in the community
- Policy holders do not believe it is a problem; therefore, do not address.
- Increasing Parental Involvement
- Providing an equal playing field (opportunity)

Students

Factors that Contribute to Achievement Gap

- External factors
- Education not a priority

- Lack of motivational drive
- Parents are high school dropouts
- No support from home; lack of guidance
- Teachers can't teach because of discipline problems in the class and too many students in class.
- Some teachers don't care.
- Attendance
- Lack of guidance
- Few role models
- Too many Exit Exams [high school graduation tests]

Effect of Achievement Gap

- Less education – dropping out of school.
- Low self-esteem
- Image of town has more poor people and crime increases

Ways to Close the Achievement Gap

- Stop blaming others and “Study”
- Encourage their fellow classmates
- Get tutoring
- Early Discipline Programs in elementary
- Incentive Program
- Nontraditional education
- Be a motivator for younger children

Barriers to Closing the Achievement Gap

- Lack of effort on part of students
- Lack of parent support
- Drugs and teen pregnancy
- Cultural differences

Themes and Pattern of Combined Groups

Research data were collected through interviews and written in narrative form. Data were categorized according major points that were revealed in the interviews. For each major point a summary of the Superintendent of Schools' responses, Board of Education members' responses, and Principals' responses, a summary of Teachers' responses, and a summary of Students' responses were presented respectively.

Factors that Contribute to Achievement Gap

The Superintendent of Schools, Board of Education members, and Principals voiced overall that lack of parental involvement was a major factor that affected the achievement gap between Black and White high school students. One administrator (A1) stated, "Parents do not send their children to school to be thugs. They want them to learn and to do better than them. But the parents are overwhelmed with everyday life that their children's education takes a back seat." One administrator (A2) expressed, "Some parents are too young and do not know how to be a parent, or their academic skills are weak too; therefore, they stay away from the school and they do not provide their children the educational support they need." Other contributing factors included socioeconomic status, education not valued in the home, lack of community involvement, lack of role models, lack of minority teachers, low expectations for some students, peer pressure,

discipline issues, lack of motivation by students and the students' environment outside of school.

The Superintendent of Schools believed that working mothers and single parent family status limit the ability for parental involvement. Also, the Superintendent of Schools believed that prior to the Division of Accountability, students were promoted based on age. The Superintendent shared that years ago busing was initiated to provide equality of education. One administrator (A1) stated,

There is no achievement gap, but an opportunity gap. Close the opportunity gap by starting from the cradle and throughout public education. We must break the cycle. If we raise the bar for the majority of the student population, then the lesser will rise to meet the rigor. Overall, the community needs to expect higher of all students, instead of a select few.

Another administrator (A2) stated, "Many White students have more opportunities due to socioeconomic status because they are able to travel and are exposed to several enriched environments; however, since the economy is spiraling down, Black and White students are almost on an equal playing field." The high school administrators believed that high school students have priorities mixed up and are not focused on their education. In addition, failure in the eighth grade, especially low reading and math scores, is a strong indicator of the dropout rate. As one administrator (A2) stated, "Students who are already behind before entering high school get further behind and frustrated with their performance and quit. Also, the classroom size is too big to provide individualized support to students who are already behind." One of the Board members (B1) expressed, "It is not race that causes the achievement gap: it is economics. Also, peer pressure begins as early as in middle school which leads to discipline issues in schools. The environment that they live in is not different from TV's programs or the music that they

listen to; therefore, that affects students' academic ability to focus". Another Board member (B2) stated, "Black parents need to put their foot down about their children doing their school work – play time vs. study time."

The teachers voiced overall that parental involvement and parents' value of education were two major factors affecting the achievement gap. In addition, teachers believed that expectations should be high for all students to succeed, though most of them agreed that was not often a reality. One teacher (T4) stated, "Black students, especially low achieving students, are bad because they are expected to be bad. Students misbehave in classes because they are academically weak; therefore, increasing their chances to get put out of school or dropping out". Other factor teachers believed affect the achievement gap is previous education placement. One teacher (T2) stated, "Students who are previously tracked in early grades make the gap wider. When students are tracked because of academic ability, especially low level students, the expectation of their performance by teachers is low too. Students develop a complex and only perform at that level." They also noted socioeconomic status, student's work ethics, peer pressure, discipline issues, lack of minority teachers, lack of role models, and mentors from the community as factors affecting student achievement. The teachers expressed that if the students had more role models or teachers who they could identify with, this would influence their desire to stay in school and obtain a high school diploma. One teacher (T3) said, "The achievement gap is a reflection of the community."

The student participants acknowledged that there are many reasons for the achievement gap between Black and White high school students: lack of parental involvement, lack of motivational drive, lack of education being valued within the home,

lack of role models, poor study habits, teenage pregnancy, working to help support family, peer pressure – “Too cool to be smart” and dysfunctional surroundings. One student (S8) stated, “Some teachers cannot teach. Some teachers are too busy to give extra assistance because they have too many students in the class. And some teachers do not care.” Another student (S4) stated, “If they [Schools] start a tougher discipline in elementary school or provide a discipline program like STAR to keep students on track, students will be more focused to stay in school.” One student (S3) stated, “We have too many tests to take. Because of that many students want to dropout because they can’t pass the graduation tests.” Several students stated, “People don’t get smarter with tests.” Another student (S2) commented, “Isolating 9th graders from the rest of the high school students will help them because they will be less distracted; therefore, students are mostly likely not get behind.” Another student (S4) added, “ As a high school student, you need more guidance, someone to stay on you.”

Most students thought that issues outside the school contributed to their achievement in high school, like cultural differences and home lifestyle. One student (S7) stated,

I have no role model. Around my neighborhood, I see people who are gangsters. No one is trying to get more education. My mother tells me to do my homework, but there is no follow through. No one is there to sit down with me. I know that my mother cared, but she just did the best she could.

Another student (S5) stated, “I live with my grandmother and she cannot help me with my assignments. Most Black parents don’t get involved until graduation day.” One student (S1) stated, “White children do not have the drama in their neighborhoods like Black children. They don’t have people in the neighborhood cussing and fighting at each other.” A student (S4) expressed, “I can skip school and hang out with others and get

away with it.” Another student (S8) said, “We cannot change cultural differences or other people’s home life.”

Effect of the Achievement Gap

The Superintendent of Schools, Board of Education members, and Principals voiced that the achievement gap has a major impact on the economics of the community overall. One administrator (A1) voiced, “By the time students reached high school, it is almost too late. Students are already 2-3 years behind. High schools are playing catch-up and providing a mediocre high school diploma.” According to one of the administrators (A2), “The long-term effect of the achievement gap increases the likelihood of premature babies, continues the cycle of poverty because of limited opportunities, and increases the crime rate within the community.” According to one of the Board Members (B2), “The achievement gap creates a perception that Black kids are dumb and cannot learn; therefore, they are given limited chances.”

Teachers believe the achievement gap increases students’ frustration. The students believe that they cannot achieve because they are behind academically. Students begin to misbehave, which results into being forced out of school or dropping out of school. One teacher (T3) expressed, “What happens at school will happen in the community; therefore, less education mean an increase in unemployment, crime, and poverty.”

Some students said the achievement gap causes students to have a low self-esteem; therefore, not caring about their education. According to one student (S6), “Students start missing days from school and get further behind. Being behind in their school work causes them to want to quit school.” The group believed that the achievement gap is just a continuous downward spiral.

Ways to Closing Achievement Gap

The Superintendent of Schools and Principals perceived their role in closing the achievement gap is to provide alternative opportunities for all students to obtain a high school diploma. One alternative is Ninth grade centers. Ninth grade centers help students transition from the middle school by providing students with a smaller setting and additional nurturing that is needed for students to stay focused and stay in school. Others opportunities include non-traditional high schools that are computer-based where students work at their own pace and emphasis is placed on community service. Still another non-traditional high school is Night High School. There is also an alternative program in the Career Technical which will provide students with a vocational-technical skill to enter in the job market after high school or to gain additional post-secondary training. In addition to offering other opportunities to obtain a high school diploma, the Superintendent of Schools and principals perceived the value of developing relationships with students, standard based curriculum, and identifying students who are academically weak earlier to provide additional support are important keys to success. The Superintendent of Schools encourages the 3R's [Relationships + Relevance + Rigor = Success]. In addition to encouraging positive relationships, the Superintendent viewed his role to address needs of students. One way to address needs is have "Sensitivity Programs". The Superintendent (S1) stated, "I feel that we should be more accommodating to one another and not be divided and have understanding of everyone." The Superintendent expressed the need to build relationships with more Black leaders in the community to provide more role models for Black students. The Superintendent expressed that he desires to hire more Black educators even though competition with the

opportunities in the big cities is a challenge. The Superintendent and principals believe that they are to provide other opportunities that are important for students to be successful include offering a variety of extracurricular activities for students to get involved in, like the Fine Arts, Technology, and Athletics.

The Board of Education members feel that their role is to provide a variety of opportunities for success via setting budget and policies to meet the needs of our children in this community. One Board member (B1) stated, “I will push for more highly qualified Black teachers to be hired so that Black students would have a role model.” The Board members feel that they are liaisons who bridge the gap between the schools and the community.

Teachers perceived their role in closing the gap is to encourage all students, to provide extra support [tutor] and to treat all students the same. Also, teachers perceived themselves as mentors and nurturers. One teacher (T1) stated, “It is about how big the heart is. Students know if you care or not.” Another teacher (T3) expressed, “It is important to know your child’s background or an understanding of their cultural background. When you have the understanding, not saying that means to have less expectations, but it helps the teacher meet the needs of the child to make progress in school.”

Students perceived that their role is to study more, to stay focused, and to stop doing just enough to get by. Some students felt that they can encourage each other to help stay in school and motivate young children to see the importance of education and getting a high school diploma. One student (S6) expressed, “I get onto my younger brother and help him with his work because I do not want him to struggle like I did. He can’t say he

doesn't have any support." A Black student concurred with the White student about his younger sibling too. Another student (S5), a single mom, commented, "With my child, I am going to make sure that my daughter gets her education."

Barriers to Closing the Achievement Gap

The Superintendent of Schools, school administrators, Board of Education members, and teachers felt that increasing parental involvement, increasing community involvement (for example more Black leaders to become mentor's), and increasing the number of Black teachers in the system were major challenges. The Superintendent of Schools (S1) said, "We should be more accommodating to one another and not divided." In addition, the general consensus among the elite group was that breaking the cycle of poverty will be a major challenge. Students expressed the biggest barrier would be changing students' attitudes about school. And one teacher (T1) said, "Changing the mindset of students that immediate gratification is not as rewarding as staying in school and receiving a high school diploma is a big challenge."

Summary

Chapter 4 presents a concise overview of the purpose of the study. The researcher's purpose for this study is to determine how school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers, and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States. Through the utilization of qualitative research methods, data were collected. An analysis of the data collected in the interviews of the Superintendent of Schools, school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers, and high school students was categorized by theme and presented in narrative form. In

addition to interview responses, general school district data were collected from the Georgia Department of Education and presented in three tables.

Based on the data collected in the interviews, the major factor that contributed to the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in this Southeastern school district in the United States was parental involvement. However, other factors that contributed to the achievement gap included socioeconomic status, low expectations for some students, lack of role models, lack of community involvement, lack of minority teachers, peer pressure, discipline issues, and the students' environment outside of school.

Chapter Five

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has placed more accountability on many school systems. School systems have been challenged to implement standards-based reform to close the achievement gap among all students regardless of race and socioeconomic status. With this challenge, standardized testing has been highly used to measure progress within a school. High schools are measured by their students' performance on a high school graduation test. In addition to the number of students passing the high school graduation test per subgroup category, high schools are accountable for the number of students graduating to make adequate yearly progress as defined by No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In the Southeastern county school district in the United States studied, there was an achievement gap between Black and White high school students of over 20% in math and 8% in reading over the last six years. This study was designed to examine how school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in the Southeastern school district in the United States. Chapter five presents a discussion of research findings, conclusions, implications and recommendation for further study.

Summary

The issue of Black and White achievement gap is a problem that has been revolving for years in the academic arena. However, despite its prolonged existence, no real explanations have been found for this omnipresent issue in the United States, especially in the Southeastern region. From desegregation laws to present day federal legislation of

the NCLB, the achievement gap between Black and White students has been gradually narrowing, but still is a problem, which manifests throughout K-12 public schools and continues to exacerbate throughout society. The research was designed to collect in-depth knowledge of the perception of school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers, and high school students on the achievement gap between Black and White High School students in a Southeastern school district of the United States. Using qualitative research techniques, this researcher interviewed the Superintendent of Schools, school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers, and high school students about their perception of the achievement gap between Black and White high school students. In addition to interviews, demographic information of the Southeastern school district of the United States, state testing data, graduation rate data, and AYP data from the Georgia Department of Education was used for the study. The findings derived from the interviews were used to draw conclusions and to consider implications for this study.

Analysis of Research Findings

The analysis of the data collected from the interviews conducted by the researcher was to get an expressive depiction of how school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers, and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States. In addition, state testing and graduation rate data collected from Georgia Department of Education since the mandate of the NCLB was analyzed. The end result of this data collection process was the identification of four themes that emerged about of the achievement gap and strategies to closing the achievement gap. These four facets are

these: 1. Factors that contributes to Achievement Gap, 2. Effect of Achievement Gap, 3. Ways to close the Achievement Gap, and 4. Barriers to Closing the Achievement Gap.

Discussion of Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how school administrators, members of the Board of Education, teachers and high school students perceive the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States. The qualitative data derived from the interviews provided inclusive in-depth knowledge of the perspectives of each key stakeholders of the achievement gap between Black and White high school students.

Factors that contribute to Achievement Gap

All participants in this study reported that they perceived the lack of parental involvement was a major contributing factor of achievement gap between Black and White high school students. Other factors included socioeconomic status, class size, low expectations of some students, tracking, lack of role models, lack of minority teachers, lack of motivation, discipline issues, peer pressure, and lack of community involvement. From the demographics collected about this Southeastern county in the United States, it is evident that several schools are eligible for Title I funds; however, since the NCLB, the high schools of this Southeastern school district are not eligible for Title I.

As early as 1966, the Coleman Report reported that the Achievement gap was related to family background. Students with similar family backgrounds had similar test scores, whether they came from a good or a bad school. Several participants felt that poverty was another major factor which coincided with Payne (1996). In addition, minority students

and students from low-income families, especially in urban and rural areas with high concentration of poverty, had the lowest graduation rate (Stanley and Plucker, 2008).

According to Oakes (2005), tracking has a significant impact on Black-White achievement gap. Black students were placed in low-track academic courses. Oakes mentions that when students are placed in these groups, predictable characteristics are created. As a result of tracking students, teenagers are treated looked upon differently; therefore, these students experience school differently. The predictable characteristics mentioned by Oakes (2005) were expressed by the teachers and one of the Board members as to how Black students are labeled in school and the low expectations of them. Also, Rousseau and Tate (2003) noted that Blacks students are frequently the victims of negative attitudes and lowered expectations from teachers, counselors, and administrators. Being the recipients of lowered expectations from school personnel, Black students often experience alienation and distancing in school which results to poor performance and increasing to dropping out of high school. Many of the participants of this study acknowledge that low teacher expectation contributes to the achievement gap.

In analyzing, the High School Graduation Test data in reading and math and graduating rate for both Black and White students from the Georgia Department of Education, there is significant evidence that Blacks are lagging behind their counterparts which consistent with Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) study that “the unconscious assumption seems to be that the traditional low performers cannot surpass—merely approach—the performance of the norm group” (p. 138). Research of Bali and Alvarez (2004), NAEP (2005), and Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) indicate that the achievement gap widens throughout the later elementary grades and on into middle and

high school. The achievement gap trend Haycock (2001) noted is similar to the performance of the high school students in this Southeastern school district, especially in high school -2.

As to the graduation rate, Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) surveyed students for the purpose of determining why they left high school before graduating. Many students responded: a lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school was boring; feeling unmotivated or not inspired to work hard; academic challenges for example poor early grade preparation which resulted into failing in school; and the weight of real world events that are considered to be adult-like responsibilities. Parenting and taking care of a family member are some examples of real world events. The students who participated in this study voiced the same rationale for the reasons about why students lag behind and do not complete a high school diploma in the Southeastern county in the United States. Most of the participants, especially the teachers in this study, expressed the need of more role models and minority teacher. As noted by Brown and Uhlenberg (2002) and Salinas (2002), minority teachers may be better able to meet the learning needs of minority students and may improve the academic achievement and graduation rate of minority students.

Effect of Achievement Gap

The Superintendent of Schools, school administrators, Board members, and teachers agree with Payne (1996) that poverty is a major contribution to students' ability to learn. It is perceived that poverty has a long-term effect on the achievement gap. Often, poorer students do not come prepared for school. Educators must find ways to meet the needs of the students and provide the same opportunity to succeed as their wealthier counterparts.

The achievement gap perpetuates the cycle of poverty, which in turns manifests in the community. As quoted by one of the teachers, “The schools are a reflection of the community.”

Closing the Achievement Gap

Knesting (2008), Bridgeland et al (2006), and Stanley and Plucker (2008) noted in their findings that high school students believed that there are things in which schools can do to decrease the dropout rate. Some of these things are the new three R’s of education reform: relationship, relevance, and rigor. These findings coincided with the responses from the “Elite” interviewees and the teachers in this study. The adult participants of this study acknowledge that schools need to implement programs that identify at-risk students as early as middle school, alternative education including non-traditional high schools, improve communication between parents, and increase community involvement by getting mentors for students.

Dolejs (2006), Oberman and Symonds (2005), and Jordan et al (2000) research findings indicate implementing a comprehensive school reform that effects every aspect of school functioning, such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, school organization, necessary support for students having difficulties, parental involvement, and sustained professional development for the staff improves student achievement, especially students who are in high-poverty. Positive results include improvement of the graduation rate, attendance rates, grades, and attendance to 2-and 4-year colleges and universities (Shorr & Hon, 1999 & Elliott, Lawrence, & Gilroy, 2002).

Barriers to Closing the Achievement Gap

With the mandate of No Child Left Behind, many of the participants felt that the gap will narrow, but never close completely. Some of the rationale expressed was the cultural differences and community mindset. As noted by Hale and Rollins (2006), school officials must convince reluctant teachers and students that all students can achieve high standards. And they must persuade parents and entire communities that higher expectations are in everyone's best interest.

Another barrier that was perceived by the educators was the ability to hire highly qualified Black teachers. With the teaching profession in competition with corporate America, many minorities who go to college are in high demand from other fields that have a strong desire to diversity the workforce and corporate America often pays a significantly more and are well respected as a profession (Chaika 2004).

Conclusions

The researcher has concluded from the study that the Superintendent of Schools, school administrators, Board of Education members, and teachers are aware that there is an issue with achievement gap between Black and White high school students because of No Child Left Behind. However, many of the "Elite" interviewees focused on the achievement gap of all children, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, as a whole instead of as parts. Comments from the Superintendent and school administrators indicate that the achievement gap starts early in a child's education career and parallels with the thought from all the participants' perception that parents are the key for their child's success. Based on the responses from the students who participated, the Black students have more issues to deal with than the average White student in this community which

affects their learning process. Breaking the cycle and understanding the students from poverty is the key for this school district. In order to increase the student achievement, it is going to require more community involvement, especially from the Black leaders of the community. As one administrator stated, “The Black leadership in this community is too fragmented.”

Teacher participants believe that early tracking of students contributes to the achievement gap, but none of the adult participants, Superintendent, school administrators, Board of Education members, and teachers all of whom were in authoritative positions seem willing to try to change. All of the adult participants of the study acknowledge the achievement gap, but only 1 of them, a Board of Education member, seemed determined to try to change anything. Other adult participants were concerned with the achievement gap, but almost no one believed in his/her ability to make a difference. The student participants really felt that teachers did not care, but at the same time felt that too many students in the classroom and disruptive students affected why teachers appeared to not care. While the researcher was not intended to solicit emotion about the academic conditions in the school district, in retrospect the researcher was surprised that there was little outrage or belief in their ability to change the situation. No one personalized their perception of the achievement gap. The achievement gap appeared to be systemic problem, perhaps of the nation as a whole.

In evaluating the whole picture of this Southeastern community in the United States, a community with a large low-income population would only provide jobs that require low-skill job opportunities to maintain a stable economics. Even though there is presently a 4-year college, many of the residences of this Southeastern county in the United States do

not take advantage of this opportunity. Based on the enrollment for 2009-2010, only 43% of the student population is made of residents within this county (www.dca.state.ga.us).

Encouragingly, the Black-White gap of attending higher education almost mirrors the graduation rate of the high schools in this district although the higher education graduation rate is still dismal for minority students. Until the mindset of the entire community changes and breaking down barriers, the achievement gap will always be there.

Implications

The researcher's purpose of this study was to develop a narrative of the school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers, and high school students' perception on the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States. The researcher's findings from this study may provide a deeper understanding of why the achievement gap between Black and White high school students and additional possible solutions to reduce the achievement gap within a Southeastern school district in the United States. The implications of this study relates directly to school districts of similar demographics who may struggle to close the achievement gap in their high schools, especially among Black and White high school students. In addition to the school district, this study can be utilized by the community when looking potential issues and opportunities facing this Southeastern county of the United States over the next 20 years. Such issues include population, housing, economic development, cultural resources, community facilities, land use, transportation, and intergovernmental coordination.

According to federal mandate, NCLB, school administrators are responsible for closing achievement gap in their district regardless of race and socioeconomic status and other factors that school administrators cannot control. The study provided a comparison of school administrators, Board of Education members, high school teachers, and high school students' perceptions of the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in a Southeastern school district in the United States. The researcher's findings from this study may also benefit the participants because they will have an opportunity to reflect on student achievement between Black and White high school students within their school district.

Recommendations

As long as accountability for student achievement is mandated, additional research conducted about Black students in this Southeastern school district of the United States would be very important. There are several areas of possible research that would be important to explore that this research did not directly focus on. First, a study that is gender specific, especially with Black males, that examines the K-12 achievement gap. Second, a study that focuses on the academically achieving black high school students' perceptions of how self, family and school impact their achievement. Third, in the court case *Brown vs. Board of Education*, it was stressed that the "badge of inferiority" stamped on minority children by segregation hindered their full development no matter how "equal" physical facilities might be; therefore, desegregation by means of busing was essential. This presents a historical study to be investigated on the effects of busing on student achievement. Finally, it would be interesting to replicate this study with other racial and cultural groups who influence the AYP status of any school district.

Dissemination

As an aspiring educational leader, the researcher plans to share the results of this study in this Southeastern school district in the United States. The researcher hopes that this information provides current school administrators other viewpoints of key stakeholders to help them critique strategies and implement other strategies to reduce the achievement gap in the high schools. The researcher aspires to present this study at the annual National Youth-at-Risk Conference. Also, the information collected is intended to provide supporting evidence on why the achievement gap and how the achievement gap can be narrowed within this Southeastern school district in the United States more effectively; therefore, increasing the graduation rate while at same time meeting the stringent requirements of NCLB and improving the overall mindset of a community. The study will be available through the database found on the Georgia Southern University Zach S. Henderson Library.

Personal Reflections

As an educator for seventeen years within this School System and a native this affluent Southeastern county in the United States, the researcher is concerned about the disparity between Black and White high school students achievement gap within this school system. From research, Black and White students both start early grades with equal test scores and the gap constantly increases beginning as early as the 3rd grade. Reflecting on the data collected, many want to blame the parents and its society for the gap. The researcher wonders why the achievement gap is so great after years of students being held captive for 7 hours a day or more in educational settings. Individuals of authority discussed many opportunities and strategies to help a student to be successful.

The students actually took some responsibility because they blamed their performance due to poor study habits. Even though the student focus groups were composed of high school students, they had already learned at an early age how to make excuses for their failure, especially the Black students. In fact, all participants provided valid reasons for the achievement gap; few of the reasons centered around the educational institution itself. From the interviews, the researcher can assume that the presence of stereotyping and self-fulfilling prophecy influences the achievement gap within the schools and that thought is echoed within the community. Schools must be held accountable; the Black community must be held accountable; and society must be held accountable. As a result of accountability, a change will come that will better prepare all children for the future.

Concluding Thoughts

The Black and White achievement gap in the high schools in this Southeastern county is a continuing cycle. Historically, the studies of achievement gap have always mainly focused on 3rd, 5th, and 8th graders test scores. Since the No Child Left Behind, the achievement gap has expanded to all grade levels. Therefore, many school districts are struggling to meet the mandate due to graduation rate of high school students, especially between Black and White high school students. This Southeastern county school district in the United States has been making progress improving high school test scores in Reading and Math, but the school district still struggles in keeping students in high school to earn a diploma. It is evident from the responses of the participants that parent involvement and socioeconomic status are major factors that impact student learning in which the school district does not have any control over. However, other factors are perceived to contribute to the achievement gap between Black and White high school

students are the number of students in the classroom, disruptive students, lack of role models (minority teachers), students who are behind academically prior to getting to high school, home lifestyles and teachers not caring. The students were extremely opened and comfortable about discussing different issues in regards to race in comparison to the some of the adult participates. Most adults did not review it as a race issue, but as an issue for all students to achieve.

Reflecting over the Southeastern county in the United States as a whole, the achievement gap within the schools is similar to the demographics and economics of the community. The school system is doing a great deal to make achievement gains against the odds. The question still remains, “Will the achievement gap between Black and White high school students be closed in the next 10-20 years?” All efforts are being made by the school system to meet the mandate of NCLB, but the school system cannot do it alone. It is going to take the entire effort of the community to help close the achievement gap.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
COVER LETTER

Dear _____,

My name is Gwendolyn J. Atkinson. I am a doctoral candidate at Georgia Southern University in the process of writing my doctoral dissertation. My dissertation entitled- Perceptions of the Achievement Gap between Black and White High School Students. The purpose of the study is to understand the perceptions of the Superintendent, High School Administrators, Board of Education Members, High School Teachers, and High School Students on Achievement Gap in your geographic area via the perspectives of Educators, community leaders, and high school students. As a result of the knowledge gained through this study will provide educational leaders new insight and will hopefully add to the professional literature.

If possible, I would like to interview you to gain insight from you regarding the Achievement Gap between Black and White High School Students. Your responses and input is very important to my research and each response will be valued. I would like to assure you that the information that you provide in the interview will be used in a most professional manner. With your approval, the interview will be audio-taped so that I will be able to record your comments accurately for my data. You are also asked to participate in a follow-up interview, if it is necessary, to clarify answers that you provide in the initial interview. Your identity and that of your school and/or district will not be revealed in this research.

Thank you in advance for your consideration and assistance in this study. If you have any questions concerning this study, please contact me at (Home) 912-262-6017, (Work) 912-267-4100 ext 2214, or via email gwen8889@bellsouth.net. Upon your request, I would gladly share the results of the study.

Sincerely,

Gwendolyn J. Atkinson

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANTS INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in the research entitled – Perceptions of the Achievement Gap between Black and White High School Students. The research is being conducted by Gwendolyn J. Atkinson, a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University. The purpose of the study is to understand the perceptions of the Superintendent, High School Administrators, Board of Education Members, High School Teachers, and High Schools Students on Achievement Gap and to provide new information in understanding the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in this particular geographic area via the perspectives of school administrators, community leaders, and high school students. As a result of the knowledge gained through this study, educational leaders, participation in the study will hopefully add to the professional literature.

I understand that this participation is entirely voluntary. I understand that I can decline to answer any question during the interview without giving any reason and without penalty. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of my participation, to the extent that it can be identified as mine, removed from the research records and destroyed. I understand that although studies have some degree of risk, there is no potential risk in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life.

The researcher will conduct semi-structured interviews with the participants, a Superintendent, High School Administrators, Board of Education Members, a focus group of high school teachers, and focus groups of high school students. Each interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Your comments will be recorded on audiotape to accurately detail comments for research data. All audiotapes will be securely stored for

one calendar year. After one calendar year, all audiotapes will be destroyed. Participants' identities will be coded and kept confidential. Any individually identifiable information will not be released without prior consent unless otherwise required by law. Per your request you will be provided a copy of the findings from this study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

The researcher will answer any questions about the research. Anytime during the course of the project, the researcher can be reached by telephone at 912-262-6017 or via email at gwen8889@bellsouth.net. My academic advisor is Dr. Linda Arthur, and she may be contacted at (912) 478-0697 or via email at larthur@georgiasouthern.edu. If there are any questions about rights as the research participant in this study, those should be directed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Coordinator at the Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at (912)478-0843 or email IRB@georgiasouthern.edu.

My signature below indicates that I consent to volunteer to participant in an interview for this study. I understand that I will be given a copy of this form.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Print Name _____ Date _____

Signature of Parent/Guardian _____ Date _____
If participant under 18 years of age)

Investigator Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introduction per Interview/Focus Group

My name is Gwen Atkinson. I would like to thank you for participating in my doctoral study entitled – “Perceptions of the Achievement Gap between Black and White High School Students.” The purpose of the study is to gain an in-depth insight about the achievement gap between Black and White High School Students in your school district. Today, I will be conducting an audio-taped, semi-structured interview. The interview process will last about 45-60 minutes. At anytime during this interview you may decline to answer any questions or withdraw your consent without giving any reason and without penalty. Your identity will be kept confidential and there are no foreseen risks to any participants. [Additional statement in focus group] – You will be asked to introduce yourselves and during the interview you should speak one at a time and respect others’ comment. [All] - At the end of the interview will be asked to summarize your position on the topic.

Participants Interview Questions

1. What factors, in your opinion, contribute the most to the achievement gap between Black and White high school students?
2. What do you consider your role in closing the achievement gap between Black and White high school students in your school district?
3. What effect do you believe the achievement gap has on high school students?
4. What effect does the achievement gap between Black and White high school students have on our society at large?
5. What do you see as the biggest barriers to closing the achievement gap between Black and White High School students in your school district?
6. How aware do you believe educators, students, and the general public is of the achievement gap between Black and White students?
7. What do high schools do to try to narrow the achievement gap between Black and White high school students?

8. Given the achievement gap between Black and White high school students, what could high schools do to strengthen the academic performance of Black students?
9. What is the likelihood that the achievement gap between Black and White high school students may be closed in the next 10-20 years?